

Joe Sullivan

House Park Bar-B-Que—Austin, Texas

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Group Members:

Lisa Powell

Andrew Busch

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

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Lisa Powell: Today is the fifteenth of June 2007. This is Lisa Powell, and I'm here with Andrew Busch, and we are interviewing Joe Sullivan, who is the owner of House Park Bar-B-Que, on Twelfth Street, in Austin, Texas. So, first question, um, if you don't mind, would you tell us, um, your age and where you were born?

Joe Sullivan: I was born in Austin, Texas, in 1956, and I'm fifty-one years old. And it was just up the hill from here.

LP: Great, thank you. Um, so, first question, could you tell us how you got started, um, in the barbecue business, running House Park?

JS: Well, I ate here a few times as a kid, but not—not many times, because we didn't have much money. But I always liked this place; I thought it had a little magic. And when I went to work for a chip company, they put me with a guy my first day training, and this was the first stop we went to. We came through the back door and I smelled that smell again, and I knew that some day I'd—I'd have this place or another one. And sure enough.

LP: And so which chip company was it that you were working for, and was that—um, around what year was this that they were serving that kind of chips here?

JS: That was in about '75. It was Morton's Potato Chips. They sold, uh, potato chips and 635 other items that you would use in a restaurant or a café. So we had a good, good business down here. But I just smelled it, it's—to me, it's like magic. It—I knew some day I'd have this place or another one as good or better.

00:02:05

LP: And what year did you purchase this place?

JS: It happened in '81. We had a—it's easy for me to remember because there was a hundred-year flood, Memorial Day of '81, and that was my very first day. Had—I had mud up to my ankles.

LP: OK, and, um, I think, when I was talking to you back in May, you mentioned that there, um, was a—there was a story of sorts about the parking lot here that day and how it was covered up, um, with some stuff from the flood. Would you mind retelling that story?

JS: Well there—like I said, there was a flood, and it left behind car parts, um, furniture, anything you could imagine was in the parking lot, and I have a pretty big family. My oldest brother was a fireman, and still is, and we talked about it, and he suggested that we get some fire hose from the city, and the largest nozzle that they have man, hand-held nozzle. So, I called the landlord, and I offered to clean the parking lot so clean that you won't be able to tell it rained down here by the next morning for \$900. And he said, uh, "That's a hell of a deal if you can do it." So, what he didn't know is that we had 300 feet of hose and we had the big nozzle and had already talked to the city, and they said if we got it into the street, they would have it up before

sunrise. And we did, and they did, and the landlord was happy, and we were happy, and I did it all with volunteer help. My dad and my brothers said it was like cleaning off your driveway with the water hose. It was just simple, and it took about—it took us about four or five hours, but the pay was good. We had a good time doing that.

00:03:59

LP: So, who owned House Park when you purchased it?

JS: It was owned by a corporation called the Tex Vasco Corporation, put together by a couple of neighbors from Rollingwood. Let's see, a schoolteacher was one family, and the other one was run by a couple of state employees. And they decided they wanted to be in the restaurant business like so many people do because it looks like a great way to make a living and, uh, you know, and no way you can fail, they say, because everybody has to eat. But restaurants have the highest failure rate of any business in the, in the country. It's almost 100 percent—I think it's ninety-seven percent failure rate on a—of course, that's a new restaurant, within the first two years. It didn't work for them. They sold a couple of rent houses to keep their restaurants open; they had a place on the lake and they had this place, and, uh, they were having a real hard time. So, I offered the lady a deal. I made her finance most of it, and she—she did it. She sold it to me, so it worked out good for her, and it worked out great for me.

00:05:15

LP: And on the sign it says that, um, House Park Bar-B-Que has been here since 1943, so was there, um, do you know some of the earlier history of the place?

JS: Well, I've been told by people that used to come here that it was a restaurant that sold—it was old German people had it—and it sold goulash and soups and stews and also ice. This was a good place to buy a five-cent bag of ice. They said it must have weighed forty pounds, but it was a nickel. And the guys that opened the Hoffbrau down here on Sixth Street said they used to buy ice up here for a nickel a bag. And sometimes they'd eat a bowl of—of stew or some goulash. But in 1943, it changed hands, and it opened as House Park Bar-B-Que since '43, and it's been that way ever since. The—the pit that's in that back room there is the same pit that they've been using since 1943. And I've been using it for twenty-six years, and it's—it works really good. It's seasoned real good; it cooks like a champ. You might say it does all the work, and I get all the credit, and that's fine with me.

00:06:30

LP: So what does it mean that the—the pit is seasoned well?

JS: Well, it—it builds up that magic I'm talking about, that smell. You can go back there, if we're closed for Christmas holiday for two weeks, you walk back there, you still smell it. We don't put anything in that pit but wood. We use oak wood, and we use a little bit of dry mesquite, but it's got to be cut and dried for about a year before I'll burn it. And that combination—that smell is just—you could put anything on there, and it will cook and taste wonderful, without any extra. I don't season the meat at all. I don't put salt, no pepper, no spices, no rubs, no nothing. And I don't know many people that do it that way, but we do, and it works pretty good.

00:07:20

Andrew Busch: Um, did anyone teach you how to barbecue, or did you just kind of learn on your own?

JS: Well, I could go way back to when I was about eleven or twelve, and I—I remember cooking some pork chops on a pit at the house. They would sizzle, and I'd flip them, then they would sizzle, and I'd flip them. I mean sizzle on the top, so I'd flip them. And I finally thought they were done enough, so I brought them in the house, on a big old platter. And my dad was eating them with some potatoes and green beans and corn bread, and he was just humming, "Mmmm, mmm. These are good, good ribs, pork, good pork." And I thought, "Man, he must have got a special cut, because mine taste like charcoal." And it was burned up, but he told me to keep cooking, keep trying, and just keep it up, and I did. And, uh, finally learned that you're not supposed to hear barbecue cooking. If it—if you can hear it, it's—it is way too hot, and it's going to burn. It's burned already. So—and it's not fast, it's slow. Barbecue is a good food—slow.

00:08:35

LP: So do you still, um, do some of the cooking here on a day-to-day basis?

JS: I cook all the meat. The meat cooks all night, and I put it on about two-thirty or three in the afternoon, and then I come down here. I stoke the fire about two-thirty or three when I put the meat on, and then I come down between eight and ten and put some more wood on the fire, and seal it up and let it go by itself all night. And then in the morning about nine it comes off, and it is done. You know, you lose about—when you cook meat properly, you lose fifty percent of the weight. And most places, they don't cook it till it's done because it doesn't weigh enough. When you sell something by the pound, the less it weighs, the less you're going to get. But if it's not

done, I don't know what they're thinking. They sell something that's only lost, you know, twenty, thirty percent, and it's tough. Why would it—why even bother?

00:09:40

LP: So, you mentioned that, you know, you don't add any extra spices or salt and pepper or anything like that to your meat when you cook it in the pit. That has been here for a while, so is that—was that the tradition of House Park Bar-B-Que before you started cooking or—or do you know if they did it differently, um, before you took over?

JS: I know the people that had it right before me, they tried different things. They—they had a son that worked at the County Line, and he was kind of crooked, and he even got sued for taking the County Line recipes and going out to, um, let's see, out to West Texas with a group of people to open a restaurant to mimic them. And they got sued and lost. So he has to stay out of the restaurant business, so now he's in politics. But they used to put a—a rub on their meat. They tried it, but it never was the same twice. They put a garlic-flavored rub or a—with pepper. And they'd put chili-powder rubs, and, you know, every day it seemed like it was something different. But I got rid of all that rub, and I think I'm somewhat of a purist about barbecue, believe it or not. There's nothing like the taste of real barbecue, cooked on a real barbecue pit, but the wood, there's nothing like it. And that's what I like. I like that flavor.

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LP: And so what is the pit made out of?

JS: It's a big, brick pit. They use, uh, fire brick. It's about eighteen feet long and four-and-a-half feet wide, and we put the fire at the very front in the fire box, at the—at the start of the pit. And it

takes up about three feet, so the next fifteen we can put our meat on. So, we cook about 180 pounds a night, but we don't cook every night. We cook, you know, three nights a week, unless we have a party or something. But, um, it's just a big brick—and it has those metal doors that have the counter weights to help you lift them up, you know. And the smoke has to travel all the way from the front to the fire, all the way out the back, and then out the smokestack, so it really covers that meat up and cooks it real good.

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LP: OK, um, so you've told us a little bit about your cooking schedule for the meat. Um, we've noticed that your hours are eleven to two-thirty, Monday through Friday. How did you decide to be open during those hours?

JS: I've got a little bit different philosophy about the restaurant business, having been around it all my life, you could say. Since I was pre-teen, I was, well, you know, either washing dishes in a restaurant or, you know, being a cook's helper or something, cleaning up, or doing something. And I always wondered why people would—if you—even people that have financial problems in their business, what do you see them do? They open more; so they'll have even more bills, more labor costs, more food costs, more pilferage, more waste. And my philosophy is make it good, number one, and then you can charge like hell because it's fair. And, if you can do that, then you—if you limit the hours you are available, people will make it a point to come down and be there. And it's worked here for twenty-six years. They line up out the door at lunch time. They don't knock—you don't see them knocking now, at this hour, and you don't see them coming early. But, when we're open, they come down here, and they get here. So you do all your business, bang, right during that time. You clean up, and everybody goes home. I'll come get a

bag full of money, and go to the bank. Plus, I—I'm a family man. I never wanted a place that was open, you know, sixteen hours a day. I'm open seventeen-and-a-half hours a week, that's it. And then I cherry pick my catering things. I've got one tomorrow on a big boat on Lake Austin. It's a wedding I'm doing tomorrow. I only do the ones that make me smile, so I'm either doing it free for one of my kids' schools, or I'm getting paid full bang, but either way it makes me smile, because it feels good.

00:14:17

LP: So, do you have many regulars, who come in here every day or multiple times a week?

JS: Most of our customers are regulars. The—the rare customers, which is probably about a third of our customers, have just started coming here. But we've got people that—I call them regulars because they ate here thirty years ago, and they don't live around here, but whenever they're in town, they always come down here and eat. Or they worked by here, and they had to move away. They'll send me a letter sometimes that says "I was—ate at your place every day for twenty years, and now I'm out on North Mopac [US Highway 1, north of Austin], and I miss your barbecue place more than anything about moving." So that's—it's nice to see that kind of stuff. But most of our customers are regulars, with the, you know—with a few of the new folks, and then, uh, the people that are becoming regulars.

00:15:15

LP: Do any of the uninitiated folks ever complain about the hours or ask you why you're only open during the week for lunch?

JS: Well, a lot of selfish people will say, “You need to open on Saturday.” And usually it’s because they came by here on Saturday, and they were relatively new, and they had kinfolk in town, and I get an earful: “I came down here with my folks, and you weren’t open. So, you need to open on Saturday.” But they’re not thinking about me or my family; they’re thinking about themselves and their family. So, I guess if I’m selfish, they can be selfish too.

LP: When we stopped by to see you a few days ago, um, you had mentioned a—a little story about, ah, a certain list of top barbecue restaurants in Texas, and, um, why you had sort of—usually were on the honorable mention for that list instead of in the top ten or so. Would you mind, uh, sort of sharing that story with us?

00:16:20

JS: I’ll be glad to. Joe Nick—Joe Nick Patoski from the *Texas Monthly* is a great guy; however, he always leaves me off of his Ten Best list. So I called him. Well, I called the radio station he was talking on one day, and they asked me if I would just like to speak to him. And I said, “Yes, love to.” So, I asked him why, and he—first he made sure it was me, somehow—oh, he asked me a question, a trivia question, and I answered it correctly. So, I asked him why I’m never in the Ten Best—I get a footnote on the next page as an Honorable Mention—and he explained it this way. He said, “Your restaurant is only open Monday through Friday from eleven to two thirty. You’re not open at night. You’re not open on weekends. You don’t sell beer. You don’t take credit cards.” He said, “I couldn’t put you in my Top Ten because our subscribers or our readers might pack up their car to go to your restaurant some Saturday evening, or even daytime, and they might drive a hundred miles, because people do that, and get there, and you’d be locked up.” He said, “And they wouldn’t think bad things about you; they would think bad things about

Texas Monthly—that we're no good, we should have, you know, made it—we shouldn't have put you in there. So, until you open more hours and more days, you're going to have to be a footnote in our publication, because that is the rules." He said, "You don't qualify for the Top Ten list because of your hours." So I, uh, I can agree with that..

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AB: Uh, you told us the other day, too, that you, uh—you manage some property around town, too. Um, how did you get into that?

JS: Well I bought some duplexes in—back during one of the—the real busts of the Savings and Loan scandals back in the eighties. And that was when the tax laws changed. There were thousands of pieces of real estate that went back to the banks, in a time like we will never see again in our lifetime. And I—I believed that then, just like I do now, so I went out and I called it “kissing frogs.” I went out every weekend, when most people are working at their restaurants, and I looked at—at hundreds of duplexes and houses. And I found, um, three really nice pieces that I was able to buy back then for twenty-five, twenty-seven dollars a square foot. And now they're appraised at—you know, appraisal don't mean a thing—but you know, a sixty-nine-thousand-dollar piece of property. I went to the appraisal review board for—two days ago, and they, they, we finally agreed on two-hundred-and-eighty-seven thousand for that duplex. And, so anyway, I got some duplexes. I heard a—overheard a conversation in here one day about a duplex. I just, uh, took some notes, and kept bussing the table next to them until I heard an address and a few other things, but when I heard the guy say, “If it's that good of a deal, why the hell don't you buy it?” So, the realtor explained that he has too many properties already, and his wife's about to leave him if he doesn't stop buying properties and start selling some. So he said,

“All I do now is to sell. I don’t buy any more. She said she’d make me a single parent, because that’s what she felt like.” So I—I just went by and looked at the place; it looked brand new, and it had been repossessed by the bank, and I called Mike the Genius, my biggest, oldest brother. And he was a real estate broker, along with being a fire department lieutenant, and he got to be a broker because he hated working with the brokers that we had here. They took too much time, they cost too much money, and they were just really wasteful of your time. So, he went and did all the real estate stuff, and he’s a broker, and I—I asked him about it, and I said, “Why wouldn’t this be a good deal?” And he said, “Well, it would be a hell of a deal if it’s true. Now let’s find out if it’s true.” So we filled out a sales contract and attached a ten-thousand-dollar earnest money check to it that went straight to the bank, and met with the guy, and he accepted it right there. But we asked for everything; they paid all expenses—even made them finance it, with— with twenty percent down. So they did, and we got it. And I just, I bought a, you know, few more pieces, and it’s worked out really good, because as you know, in Austin rents have only gone one direction, and that’s up.

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LP: So, I guess to kind of, move back to the food a little bit, um, for the purpose of—purposes of the recording, um, will you tell us what different kinds of meat you have on your menu here?

JS: We sell, um, beef brisket. We sell a good smoked sausage that’s beef and pork mixed. And it’s a spicy sausage, but it’s not hot, so you can feed it to your kids, you can feed it to your grandmother. They all like it because it’s—it’s got a good, spicy taste, but it doesn’t burn your tongue. We’ve got hot sauce on the table if you want to burn your tongue or peppers on the counter. And we’ve got a good smoked chicken. And we used to sell ribs, but we don’t anymore.

We sold pork ribs, but I got some complaints about all the bones that people were leaving behind, so I decided to go with the best cut of the hog, and I got a real good pork tenderloin. So, we have pork loin, chicken, sausage, and beef brisket. And it's all just really, really good.

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LP: Do you have a personal favorite?

JS: I kind of—I kind of like, well, the pork tenderloin, in a certain conditions—like if it's just coming off the pit, forget about it. I'll get that pork tenderloin and make a sandwich with a little bit of mustard, and that is unbelievable. Even if it sits on steam table for a couple of hours, it's still good. But right off the pit, you can't touch it. But you've got to eat a little bit of the fat too. That's where—in my opinion, that's where the flavor is, if you don't rub it down with a bunch of garlic and pepper, and we don't touch it with any of that stuff. So, I just slice it straight into it and throw it on a piece of bread and go to work.

LP: And do you mind telling us where you get your meat, what your source is?

JS: I buy my meat from a guy named Doug Green at Express Meat Service. He is an old Austin guy, nicest guy you'll ever meet—helpful, friendly; he's like a Boy Scout. And he started the company in the mid nineties—came around—he called on me, and I decided I'd buy from him. And once upon a time, I had a challenge from the city to feed 1200 people in an hour. So I said, “Well sure, I can do that.” So I called Doug Green, and I said, “I'd like to rent a couple of your trucks and a couple of your workers on Saturday to do a catering.” He said, “Nope, you can't rent them, but I'll let you—let you have them.” So he sent me two guys and two vans. I had

them all day on Saturday. At the function, the boss came over and said, “Well, you did it. Forty-four minutes. Everybody’s sitting down, eating. Some people are already finished.” And without his help, it would have been real difficult to do that. He’s a great guy. He’s the—he’s, um—he was in the meat business before—worked for a big outfit, uh, Swift Meats. And then he worked for another, smaller company that was doing some crooked stuff I think, and they—they had to go bankrupt. So, he was on his own, and he started his own meat company, and now he’s the biggest pork buyer in the city. He buys more pork than any company in Austin, more than HEB [a regional grocery chain], more than Whole Foods [a national grocery chain based in Austin]. You know, in fact, Whole Foods buys their pork from him. He’s the biggest pork buyer in Austin, and his briskets come in those eighteen-wheeler trucks, one after the other. He’s a—and he’s—he’s a hell of a success story, but he’s a nice guy. He started the thing called the Rib Tickler, with MHMR [Austin’s Mental Health and Mental Retardation association] that went on for about nine years. And they never mentioned his name—they never put his name on anything, I don’t know why or how it got overlooked, but he never complained. And then he quit doing it after about seven or eight years. Something happened, and he stopped doing it. They don’t have it anymore, and they never mentioned his name, but he started that thing. He—he even called me and said, “Joe, if you’ll get in the Rib Tickler, I’ll buy a pit and loan it to you. He paid \$3500 for a custom-built barbecue pit on a trailer, and I was the first guy that got to use it at the Rib Tickler. It was a beautiful pit. I could call him today, and he’d either tell me that someone else has borrowed it or that I could come by and get it. But, I won the 1994 Rib Tickler with the Best Barbecue Sauce in central Texas. I didn’t win the ribs, but I don’t even sell ribs down here. I sold them down there though, and it raised money for MHMR, for the, the Clay Day Treatment Center, is who got my money. We—we raised them, less than \$2000 but more than \$1000, seems

like about \$1600 that day, we raised, just from our booth, and there were about a dozen of us, at least a dozen. But I did—I got the best barbecue sauce in central Texas that day, and it was a, you know, a blind judging. It was a good, good, good reward to get. It was nice.

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AB: What was the charity that you won this money for?

JS: It was a fundraiser for the MHMR of—of here in Austin, uh, Travis County Mental Health and Mental Retardation. And they have a treatment center, and the one that I picked was called the Clay Day Treatment Center at MHMR. Because they had—you could pick any of those, but it all went to the same pot. Everybody raised money for the county Mental Health and Mental Retardation.

LP: And do you remember about what year it was that you won that contest?

JS: Well, I just looked at the plaque over there, and it said September seventeenth, nineteen hundred, ah, ninety four.

LP: And have you participated in that contest any other years or in that event?

JS: Yep. Not nearly as successful, but I went back year after year, you know, raised a lot of money, had a good time, gave away a lot of shirts and stuff, and met a lot of nice folks. Never was able to get a First Place in anything after that. But, companies were going there with the only intent to win—to win. And—and some—some guys have won, you know, many. You go to Artz

Rib House over here, in my opinion one of the better barbecue places in town, he's got a wall covered with them. He's won everything he's ever entered—gumbo cook-offs, First Place; hot sauce cook-off, First Place; barbecue, First Place. You name it, that guy's won it. His walls are covered with it. He doesn't know how he does it. But I'll tell you what I like about the place, when I go in there he comps my dinner with—even if I got my kids and my lovely wife. He comes out and asks if we want dessert, and then he comps the whole damn thing. So, I like going there.

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LP: Are there any other sort of similar contests or events or, um, charity-type things that you do?

JS: I donate food a lot. Austin is—Austin is changing so much, you know, we used to have a great water festival here called the Aqua Fest. We had, like—even the Spam-o-Rama's [a yearly festival celebrating Hormel's SPAM] in trouble; it's about to go the way of the Aqua Fest. But Austin wonders what kind of festival could they have that would be successful, by that I meant what would make them a lot of money. And I tell you what would do it, is a barbecue cook-off. We have the funct—we have the place to put it, we got the people that would put it on, but they won't do it, they let Taylor have a great big one. One of the—probably one of the biggest in the country is right up the road. But it's almost a hundred miles—no, no Taylor's not a hundred miles, but it's almost fifty. But, a barbecue cook-off, a barbecue competition in Austin, Texas, would knock—knock them dead. It would be a huge success. I don't know why they don't—they don't do it.

00:29:12

LP: So, to go back to this award-winning sauce, um, do you still make your sauce the same way, and, kind of, what makes your barbecue sauce unique?

JS: Well, I can't tell you what's in it. You know what would happen to you.

AB: Of course [*Laughs*].

JS: However, that was—that was just a, you know, good—we make a good sauce, it's identical sauce that we've made then, and, uh, we haven't changed anything. We make it the same way. Um, kind of like Campbell's soup, you got to put sugar and salt in it to make—to have it—let it fight with itself on your tongue. And a few other things we put in there, but it's not as complicated as you'd think. But it's—it's good, and it's consistently good, and it's always the same. It's always good, and people talk about it all the time. Every day we hear, “That's the best sauce I've ever had. That's the best beef I've ever had.” The lady that started, um, the place on the—we talked about, County Line [another Austin barbecue restaurant]. I did a function in Westlake [a wealthy suburb of Austin, to the west of town], over by the, um—pretty close to her store at a big house out there, a reception. And she came over to me and told me that was the best beef that she'd ever had, and she assured me that she's eaten a lot. And when she walked off, the guy that hired me came over and said, “You know who that is?” I said, “Nope.” He said, “That's the lady that started the County Line.” So, I checked with somebody else, and they said, “Oh yeah, that's so and so from the County Line.” So it was a good feeling to hear her say that, and she was eating when she was talking. So, it was nice, but you hear stuff all the time, you know, “My husband never eats beans and he's had three servings of yours.” You know, “That's

the best sauce, the best beef,” “Where do you get your sausage from?” That kind of stuff. So, and it’s good, but, you know, when you hear stuff like that, you can’t get in trouble a year later and then start using something cheaper. You can’t do it. You have to keep using the good stuff, keep fixing it the same way, and don’t try to cut corners, and, you know, like everybody does. Salespeople that you buy stuff from will try to do that, “Oh use this, it’s cheaper, use this, it’s cheaper.” And it just doesn’t work, you have to use the good stuff, and you have to make it the same, and, and don’t think you’re going to make something better by changing it, because usually it backfires.

00:31:40

AB: Are there any other, uh, barbecue restaurants in the area, or barbecue chefs, that you really, uh, that you hang out with or that you enjoy eating their food?

JS: Well, I like to eat at Artz Rib House, but a lot of times I eat something called the South Austin Cheeseburger. I might have a few ribs too, but I—I’ll eat that over there because I get my fill of barbecue here. But he’s got a—a cheeseburger over there that has grilled onions, grilled jalapeños, and it is the best cheeseburger in Austin. It’s the only place that I will intentionally eat a cheeseburger—the only place. I won’t do it anywhere else but there. And he’s also a good guy, they have music at his place every night, and he’s a musician, and he’s a barbecue guy. I—I like him a lot. And let’s see, who else? I’ve got some kinfolks, a sister-in-law, whose cousins own Bert’s Bar-B-Q; they’ve got about five stores, uh, one of them just burned down, down at about six blocks from here, and they’re pretty good folks. I know some backyard barbecue people, you know that, are really, really talented at that. And a few jerky—beef jerky makers, and then Bobby Hudson at Hudson Meat Market is a good, old friend. And, of course, my meat man. But

when they need something like a good smoked brisket, they call me. They'll take one of my smoked briskets and put it on their pit, and I said, "Don't feel bad about letting—letting me do all the work and you get all the credit because it's my pit that's doing all the work anyway. So, you just serve it, you don't have to tell them who cooked it, just serve it." And, I mean, judges come down here and buy meat that way, and when they ask me what's wrong with their pit—"What did I do wrong?"—you took the wrong cut of meat. The hardest thing to cook right is a brisket, so—and I recommend pork loin or something like that, or an expensive steak. They—they try to take the hardest piece of meat there is to cook right and cook it on their home pit, probably because it's the cheapest, but the cheap meat is tough. So, I recommend something like a good pork, where they really just have to get it good and hot, and then serve it. Or they can buy one of mine, and warm it. I just—I just ask them, please don't put it in a microwave. We don't have a microwave here, we don't have a computer, we don't have a—a TV, we don't even have a freezer. We use refrigerators. I don't have a stove. I have a stove top, you know, cook top. No stove, no freezer, no microwave, none of that stuff. You don't need it. If you're really a barbecue place, you need none of that crap. You just need good barbecue. And they'll fill you up, they'll come in here and keep coming back.

00:34:38

LP: So, you said you had some people who really raved about your beans. Could you again for the—for the recording tell us what different sides you serve here?

JS: We have a homemade potato salad. We have a coleslaw that we start with whole heads of cabbage and chop it up and add some shredded carrots and a few other things and refrigerate it, get it nice and cold, and then we have the beans. Just like the sauce and just like Campbell's soup

you got to put some sugar in the beans and you got to put some salt. Just be sure you do it about fifteen minutes before you turn them off or they'll stick like crazy. And we put some spices in beans. I asked an old Mexican lady when I lived in east Austin with a Mexican family—they put me up. There were thirteen of us in the house. They made a private little area for me to sleep. Sectioned it off with sheets, put a bed in there, and said there's your room. I couldn't believe they did it. It was on the back porch, but it was screened in. Great people, and I asked the old lady—she made beans and they were great. So, I asked her what she put in them and she said, “Nothing.” So, I said, “What you talking about ‘nothing?’” She said the best beans, they don't have anything until they're done, and then you put some sugar and some salt. She didn't put chili powder. They looked almost white, and they were pinto beans. They were real, real light in color. I didn't quite follow her story, but—and to smell her beans; they tasted and smelled just like beans. You get stuff now they smell like chili—you know, they taste like ranch-style chili beans. We put a little chili powder, a good dark chili powder that I get from Rosario [of Maceo Spice & Import Company] down in Galveston and a little bit of garlic powder, stuff like that. But right before we turn them off we put in some sugar and salt and a couple other things. When they put my beans in the paper for the recipe and all that, I gave them a good bean recipe, it was close but—I got calls, too. A couple ladies called, “There ain't enough of this, there ain't enough of that.” And I said, “Ma'am, I'm sorry, everybody knows you got to add more water to beans. But be sure you add boiling water or they'll fall apart, the skins will come off, and they'll break up. If you put tap water in boiling beans, it changes the temperature too fast, and it will—it shocks them, and they'll fall apart. So, add boiling water but keep water in them and just follow that recipe and they'll be good.” I gave her a good recipe, but the paper was after me for a long time a couple years for that recipe, just for my beans, because so many people were asking them to get

it. So, I made a deal with the lady after about, after at least a year they'd ask me every two or three months. We agreed that they would take a picture of a plate of food, focusing on the beans, showing the whole thing, and put it on the front page of their Food Section, and that's how we negotiated the deal, because she just wanted to put the recipe on the third page and nothing else. I said, "Nope." So, they came out, took a nice picture, put it on the front page of the Food Section with a nice little story and the recipe. So, that's what it took.

LP: In about what year was that, and was it in the [Austin *American-*] *Statesman*, is that the paper?

JS: Yeah, Kitty Crider, the food critic, and uh, and that was probably fifteen years ago. That was probably around—it was probably around 1990, so that would be seventeen. I've got it at home with a couple of cookbooks and stuff. They call me a barbecue legend. And I'm still alive, so a living legend I guess. There's one cookbook Robb Walsh did, it's called *Barbecue Legends* and he's got me in there at four different places. And he even got a recipe screwed up.

LP: How do you feel about, sort of, being in these different publications, cookbooks, newspapers?

JS: Well, I feel good. I feel lucky, especially when other people come around to you and say, "Hey, did you see yourself in this book here?" And, you know, John Mackey, the Whole Foods guy—started Whole Foods—his little brother came in here and said, "Hey Joe, will you sign my

cookbook? I've never had a cookbook autographed by a cook before," or something like that. So, I said, "Sure, Mackey, bring it by." So, he's—he's just funny like that though.

LP: All right, so you said you don't serve beer here, but what beverages do you have to go along with the barbecue?

JS: Well, you got to have Big Red. And you really need to have like a clear—like a 7UP for the kids. And we have the soda fountain you know: RC, Diet Rite Cola, Big Red, Dr. Pepper, and 7UP. And we make a fresh brewed iced tea every morning. That's a big hit.

00:40:00

LP: And what is special about Big Red? It was kind of on the top of your list there.

JS: Well people associate barbecue with beer and Big Red. If you're open in the evening and on the weekends, forget the Big Red. They associate it with beer. Since we're open during the week, they think, "I want a barbecue sandwich and a Big Red." We sell a lot of Big Red. It's just got a good taste, you know, to wash it all down.

AB: It's a very Texan drink.

JS: Yeah, it's a Texan drink all right. The kids, they'll drink too much of it because it has a lot of caffeine in it. They'll drink it and go out and go crazy. But people, a lot of folks you know, they say, "Can't have barbecue without Big Red." You know, Robert Earl Keen, he dedicated his show at the Backyard [an Austin music venue] to us in the mid-nineties. And he has a song right

before—no, he didn't dedicate a show; he dedicated a song. He has a song called "Barbecue." And he said, "This is dedicated to Joe and the good old boys down at House Park Barbecue." Then he went on into the song. He sings a verse that talks about a plate of barbecue and a cold Big Red.

LP: So has Robert Earl Keen come into here to eat quite a bit?

JS: Not quite a bit, but he's had it quite a bit. He's been in here a few times. Usually when he's in town I'll know about it, and I'll get some food to the radio station right before he goes in for a—they'll do a talk with him on the air, and I'll ease on down there and we'll have some barbecue together.

AB: Have you had any other famous customers come through here?

JS: Well, I got a pal named Vaughn, Jimmie Vaughn, and we do custom cars, and things like that. And we both love music, him probably little more than me, but I really like it. And this is his favorite barbecue place in Texas, got to be sure you say that. It was a trivia question when they gave away some tickets to his Austin City Limits taping in the late 1990s. And it was, "What is Jimmie Vaughn's favorite barbecue place in Texas?" And a guy right down the street over here called in, Kirsten, and knew it was House Park because he always saw one of his cars would be here sometimes or his custom truck, and he won a pair of tickets to the show. And that was kind of nice. You remember Ann Richards? The late Ann Richards, Governor Richards? This was one of her favorite places too. And she'd come in here by herself and just—late. She'd

come here right before we'd close, it seem like, and stay a half hour just yapping, talking about all kinds of stuff, and how good the barbecue was. And how bad it was in New York or wherever she had just been, and how glad she was to be back and get some real Texas barbecue. And she ate it up. We had old Bush, Governor Bush, he's been here. The capitol's, you know, nine blocks down the street, so we get a lot of those legislators and their aids. Occasionally we'll get, you know, the straggling politician, lots of lawyers, lots of judges, lots of good guys, lots of bad guys. It's a real good mix. You know, we get students; we get teachers; all kinds of people.

LP: Is there any—you've got a lot of, kind of, decorations here on the wall inside the restaurant, is there anything, any particular one you want to point out or are they all kind of special?

[Laughs]

AB: I'll add on to that. Are you a fisherman?

00:43:46

JS: I've been known to catch a few fish, yeah. I catch a few fish. The reason you see all this memorabilia and stuff on the wall: everything up there means something to me. Some a lot more than others, like this one over here with the four fireman sitting on the fire truck. That's the only time in the history of Austin they've had four brother fireman at the same time—my four brothers. And that's them right there. So, there's a—that's a good—a nice picture for me to see. And then this here right below them, the boxing guy, he was world—ranked number one in the world, called Jesus Chavez, and he's a friend of mine. He was ranked number one in the world about ten years ago. When he won his big old belt, you seen those big old gold belts they get? The first place his trainer brought him was right here to this table, set it right where you're

sitting, and said, “We finally did it. Numero uno.” So, he was number one for a long time. We’d go to all the fights, sit—I’d try to get the fifth row because if you’re any closer you usually get something on you. But when the newspapers would take pictures couple times you’d see us, but you’d only see the back of our heads but they were up—they had to get behind us to get a good shot. It was—that was a lot of fun. Then there’s some old car pictures and a few jokes up there. I’ve got an old Mercury that we’ve raced. It’s at the race track up there. Lot of kids stuff too. Lot of my kids’ stuff. This picture from Red’s Range [an Austin shooting range], my son did that when he was about twelve years old. And he put, he had me put that “Wish you were here.” He did that with a nine millimeter at an indoor range. That’s pretty good shooting. I figure they should learn the proper way to handle firearms. If they ever come across one they’ll know how to hold it, how to unload it, so nobody gets hurt. You know, because when they were kids, you’d heard a lot of st—one of his best friends died of a gunshot to the heart of a pellet gun. His brother shot him accidentally and it went right to his heart in their bedroom, killed him. So, they need to know how to handle guns instead of wondering about it when they see one. At least my daughter knows how—the proper way to take a gun and unload it, and how to handle one. Nobody gets hurts. There’s my friend Cliff, Clifford Antone. And there’s some old guys. This guy had the world’s fastest Superbird. He’s a friend. He sent a picture over here that said, “Joe, that’s the best barbecue in Texas.” That’s the world’s fastest Superbird there. He raced that until the September the eleventh thing, and then he had to park it. He was in the Pro Modified. You had to race thirteen events all over the country and in Canada in order to be in that group of big shot racers. He loved this place. I raced a little cars and he raced a lot of cars, he was a trend-setting guy. He’d race cars and then everybody would just follow his lead it seemed like, for thirty years.

LP: And I see that you have a daily special board. How do you decide what today's special is?

JS: You know, I don't know how we came by that, but we've been using the same special.

Monday's the same thing, every Monday for as long as I can remember, at least twenty years.

But Friday we always put a mixed plate. People tend to take longer lunches on Friday. They get together with, with other people, they'll be bigger groups of people on Friday, and they'll spend a little more money. We try to make it easy on them, by making our most popular plate a little cheaper on Friday. They seem to like it, too, because they really come in here and eat it up.

AB: Can you tell us a little bit about the building? Has the building always been the same? Have you made any modifications to it?

JS: This center where we're at, the Enfield Shopping Center, was the very first shopping center built in Austin. It included the Tavern over here and then this horseshoe shaped building that goes around. And this place started out as a restaurant, and then like I said, in '43 it went into a barbecue place. And when I got here in '81, it is completely, exactly the same. Now it was a little different even back in the early seventies. I can remember the cash register and the counter being over there on that wall and this being a little bit different. But that lady that worked here then, she sat there and watched every move you made, to make sure you paid every dime you owed. Maybe that's why she got out of it. But the building, you know it's been—I haven't done a thing, and I've been here twenty-six years. Structurally it's the same. There's been a roof put on, and I've replaced the air conditioner three times in twenty-six years, you know. I put a five-ton unit

out there to cool 900 square feet cause there's a hell of a heat load in here. But that's what it takes.

LP: And so outside, um, between the building and Twelfth Street there's a sign with a slogan on it. And so would you mind telling us what that slogan is and maybe telling us the story of that slogan?

00:49:30

JS: That slogan is on our marquee out there by the street, and it says, "Need no teef to eat my beef," and it's cute. I had one cashier lady that when she first saw that twenty-five years ago, she said, "Joe, I can't work here with that on the sign." I said "Well, then you better find another job." She couldn't believe that I put that up there. I don't know what she thought it meant, but I know what it means. I saw a t-shirt from Sebord Parks, he's an old barbecue pit-man and he said, he had a saying on his t-shirt that said "Don't need teeth to eat my beef." But he didn't spell it like I spell it. He spelled it different and it was even a little bit different than that. So, I came together with this thing, put on my sign, but even my friend, Joe Nick Patoski at the *Texas Monthly*, always credits Sebord for that slogan that I spelled incorrectly. That's all right. I've got one of his t-shirts somewhere that has his saying on it, and I'm going to go show Joe one of these days the difference between his and mine. And I'll get it straight.

LP: And speaking of t-shirts, um, you have a pretty nice looking t-shirt yourself there, and I believe you said someone had made the drawing of the restaurant for the t-shirt. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

JS: That, that drawing is almost a caricature, but it's just—it turned out real nice. There's a convenience store right up the street on West Lynn called—it was Minute Mart Number 9. And the old man that ran it from '68 until '88 had some t-shirts done in that same style, that same design, and they sold—and people wore them like crazy, all over Clarksville, all over Austin back in those years. So, I thought “Wouldn't it be nice to get something like that?” And my future ex-sister-in law is somewhat of an artist, and always wondered how good she was, so I put her to the test. And I showed her an old Minute Mart shirt, and I showed her, and she knew where my barbecue place was but I said “Can you do it?” And she said, “Sure, I need about two days and I'll have it ready.” She had it ready in two days with everything I needed to take it to the t-shirt store and she did 100 percent much better than I ever expected. And it turned out so well that the ink salesman that sells the ink to the t-shirt store came by here with a release for me to sign and he said, “I want you to sign this,” he already had the shirts. He said “I'm taking your shirts with me to use as samples to show how good our ink works.” I said, “That is perfect.” So, you can see the sign on the t-shirt, even that little writing shows up good. Years later it still shows up.

AB: Speaking of Clarksville, could you maybe tell us a little bit about Clarksville, a little of the history, maybe how the area has changed, and,um, what's nice about having your business here in Clarksville?

JS: Clarksville is the oldest black community in Texas. It's right up the street. It's been around since the 1800s. And it's—it was, um, you know dirt roads, gravel roads, outside facilities, and a real rough, tough place for years and years. But, you know, then in the seventies, late seventies,

when the hippies left and the yuppies started coming in the eighties, they bought those old shotgun shacks and built, you know, big fabulous homes, so it's changed. And now it's the most expensive land in Austin, is right up the hill. My folks bought a place in '53 and my family's moved back as they've been able to, and I built a two-story house up there just about six blocks from the restaurant and six blocks from my parents. So, my parents have eleven grandbabies within walking distance of their house in Clarksville, the same little two-one that's now a four-three. And they're both retired, in their late seventies, but they've got family around them and they live in the same house they raised their seven babies. And, it just doesn't get any better than that. Taxes are high—you know, you might pay \$6,000 or \$7000 a year in property tax, but you get to be close to home. And that's—that means a lot.

LP: Does your family come down here to eat a lot or do you take the barbecue home?

00:54:30

JS: About once a month I get a call, "We're going to have dinner at so-and-so's house and we were thinking about barbecue. So, can we come by and get it? Or do you want to just bring it?" I usually bring it because I want to make sure it gets heated correctly. But I have some pretty good cooks in the family. We have a get together every two weeks at my parent's house. We have dinner at their house every two weeks. And someone either cooks, they grill something, or they make a big pot of something. There's always a big dinner every other Saturday evening there. So, if I have to bring dinner once a month, it evens out there, but somewhere, it's about once a month or less, probably eight or ten times a year. It's not bad, in fact I like it.

LP: One question I neglected to ask you earlier when you were talking about your pit and what kind of wood you use. Where do—where do you get your wood, or what do you particularly look for in the wood that you use?

JS: I look for an honest wood man. When you buy a cord of wood, you got to realize, you're not going to get a cord, you're going to get what's closer to half a cord unless you measure it and you know, you have them stack it a certain way. Guy delivers a cord of wood in a pickup truck. You can't fit a cord in a pickup truck. Some people think you can, but I'm going to tell you, you can't because I bet before and won. So, I found a good honest wood man years ago. He drives all the way from Leander [Texas] with a truck and a trailer, a big trailer, and I get two cords. I get a cord-and-a-half of oak that's fresh cut, and it goes anywhere from about six inches in diameter down to about two or three. And I get it about eighteen inches long. And then I get mesquite from the guy that's small and real dry. We'll use the mesquite to start a fire because it makes a real hot, a real hot bed of coals real quick. And then we'll add to that bed of coals with some fresh cut oak. People call it green oak. If you call it green oak, I had a guy try to sell me horse apple one time as green oak because it was green. We couldn't make a deal. But I've used the same guy for years and years. I had a fellow before him, but he got in trouble and had to disappear. I found—in fact, my meat man Doug Green told me about him and I called him, and sure enough, he's an honest wood man. And I'm a regular customer for him. That's what people don't realize. If you, if you're fair and you're honest, you get regular repeat business. I always try to be on the side, believe it or not, of the customer, a little bit. I look at their plate and I think it wouldn't cost me anything more to put this on that plate, right there. Instead of putting two sides, like every restaurant in Austin, I give them all three if they want them. If they don't want

them they don't get them. They'll get two. But if you want all three you get them. If you give people what they want, they'll eat it. If you force stuff on them, they throw some of it away. Think about it: I give them what they want. And I give them—when I do a catering like tomorrow, we'll do this catering—I have an all-you-can-eat barbecue buffet with all three sides and potato salad, you know, and all that good stuff. I let them serve themselves. Do you know that at the end of a function you can't tell? The trash cans, they don't weigh anything. They're empty. They got paper plates that are empty. If you get people, you take five helpers with you and you serve food to everybody, boom, boom, boom, boom, give them all the same—you lift the trash cans after that you can't lift them, they're so full of food. This guy doesn't eat potatoes, this guy doesn't eat this, this guy doesn't eat slaw. But you give it to them, they don't fill up, they throw away the stuff. If you give them whatever they want, they don't even take more food. At the end of the day, you use the same amount of food and it all gets eaten. People are happy and they come back to tell you how good it was instead of mumbling about how bad it was. Who's been to those caterings? "Man this is horrible. What is this? It's supposed to be beef. That came out, that chopped beef came out of a can. I just saw the guy open it!" That's crazy, crazy. And they're the same price or more. Make it good, get a good fair price for it, and then give them what they want. And everybody's happy.

LP: Well, Andrew, do you have any other questions you'd like to ask?

AB: I had—I had one question I'd been thinking about and that is what do you see as the future of House Park? Are there any family members that might be willing to take over after you? House Park, you know, twenty years from now what do you hope to see for House Park?

JS: Well, I did an interview when my son was three. I remember telling that guy that, “If I want to make my son cry, I’ll bring him down here, all I have to say is ‘Some day all of this is going to be yours.’” And he used to cry like hell. Well he worked today—he’s seventeen—he worked down here today because it’s summertime. And it was, when I walked in he was like, “Hey dad, come look at the back room.” And he cleaned it up real nice. He said “I already done all the dishes,” and it was thirty minutes before he got off work. He was through. So, I put him back to work. He’s talked about it. But, this business, even with these hours and stuff, you got to be careful, man. Restaurant business is tough, it’s real tough. A banker used to say, “Boy, I wish I had your job.” And he probably did. But he was a banker. My son’s thought about it, talked about it, but I think he wants to do this as a default. You know, “Hey dad, if I work for you, you could just pay me like crazy and I wouldn’t have to do much work.” Hasn’t said it, but I can kind of feel it. If you’re not down here for the first fifteen years I open and close, open and close, you know, I swept, I mopped, I took out the trash. I had a good helper, but still I did it. I did it like every day, and it got hot in the summertime and cold in the winter. Maybe my son, you know, the fact that this shopping center hasn’t sold and been redeveloped, you know we’re in that flood plain built—they’re figuring out ways of building up, letting parking be below. They just did it right over here around this corner. They took a hundred-year flood plain building and made the entrances about a foot higher and that solved the insurance problem.

01:01.35

AB: That’s for Shoal Creek?

JS: Yeah, yes, because it's a monster. That creek is a monster. When it gets really, really coming—because they dredged it and they made it run a whole lot faster so it doesn't rise up like it used. You used to stand out there and watch it rise. You'd see a paper cup floating, and it'd still be floating and the creek would be rising. And now you know you see a paper cup and it goes though quick. It still rises but nothing like it used to. It moves real fast. They dredged it out, they took out all the cars and the old bridges and stuff and they cleaned it out a lot and they let the water move through real quick to get to the lake. We haven't seen anything like that one we had in '81. Some folks saw—we've had about four good floods but nothing been anywhere near us. You know Lamar gets covered over and Tenth Street gets closed, but nothing around here. I probably figure that this center may sell. My old landlord, present landlord, is a family and the sons have taken over. I noticed they sold the parent's home that they grew up in and it was torn down immediately and some kind of condos have been built there. So, they're moving pretty quick and they're real estate guys. They may sell this, but the guy did just ask me how long a lease I wanted. So, I've got a new five year sitting on my desk at home about to go back to him. Maybe I should have went for twenty-five.

AB: That's about all I have. How about you, Lisa?

LP: I think those are about all of my questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to tell us or like to have on the recording?

JS: I guess we just about covered it all, but you're never too far from Twelfth and Lamar

[Laughs].

AB: That's what they say at The Tavern too.

JS: You got that right.

AB: Actually, could you tell me about what the Tavern used to be, before it was a bar?

JS: I remember—before it was a bar?

AB: Well, before it was a sports bar like it is now. Because it looks to me like it's an old sort of German-style house. The frame is still intact. It's a neat building.

JS: That place has been around, like I said, this place was the first center built, but the Tavern was on the corner before they built all of this stuff. And, uh, some people say it was a brothel back in the old days, stuff like that. There's even a big safe in the wall. I had a guy go over there and try to open it. He couldn't do it, so they got somebody else to do it and there wasn't anything in it. But the first delivery pizza opened in the back of the Tavern. It was called Busy Buck's Pizza, and he used a three-wheel Harley Davidson motorcycle that used to be a cop motorcycle. And he delivered pizza on a three wheel motorcycle right out of the back of the Tavern. The Tavern was beer bar for, oh Lord, a long time. When I got this place I can remember being in the Tavern one afternoon and the cook coming out of the kitchen and saying, "That's the last cheese. No more cheese, no more cheeseburgers." And they used to sell about \$300 a day worth of the beer. Not much at all. It was hot, it was dirty. And then Jim Lawson, the guy that had The

Steamboat—he’s had five or six successful restaurants in Austin. Charlie Spooner’s was one of them, The Steamboat, Abel Moses—he had a bunch of places. Well, he bought it and gave the other lease holder a commission as part of the sale price. He was going to give him like five percent of the gross. And he told me one time, he turned it around completely. They do millions of dollars a year over there now where they used to do about, you know, \$60,000 a year or something. He said, “So, I have to pay this son-of-a-gun this much money this month.” I said “Well, that’s too bad.” And he said, “No, I like it.” He said, “The more I pay him, the more I make.” Then he got out of it a few years ago, tried to. And the new owners came in, and they couldn’t get a beer permit, they couldn’t get a liquor license, they couldn’t get all these permits, and they had to call him back to help them. Because the city wouldn’t—they were closed for about six or seven months. And they say they spent \$350,000 to remodel the place enough to bring it up to current city code, which is what you have to do in a restaurant if it changes names, or if it’s closed more than ninety days. If you sell it and you don’t change anything, you don’t even change the name like when I bought this place, the name stayed the same, everything stayed the same. All I did was get a health inspection. That was it. I didn’t have to upgrade anything. But the guy that owns Chuy’s came by when I had trouble with a, with a landlord before one time by lease. They had a property manager running it and he was trying to gouge me. So he came by to give me some hints. He’s also a car guy. Mike Young is his name. And he looked around and said that Cullen Davis never had enough money to bring this place up to code, and he listed off a million dollars worth of stuff. And then he said I’d only end up with about one bar stool right over there. And no parking, no dining room, just one stool because of the city code. And that’s what he does. He knows about that stuff. He said, “If you need to really fight dirty, then bring that up.” The old Tavern, that place is, is really successful now, and you know, the

guy even said, “We don’t have any competition. Nobody sells, you know, lukewarm food. And you stand around and wait thirty minutes for a table. Nobody does that stuff.” He said, “I don’t know why it’s so busy.” That’s what he said years ago. Anyway, Barbecue Bob Cole from the radio station is one of the owners now. That and Hills Café. All you hear now is they have the best burgers in town but, you know, that ain’t happening. They ain’t that good.

AB: Tavern?

JS: Yeah. It’s overpriced. It’s nothing special. It’s just like going to any franchise place that has a bad waitperson. The food comes out; it isn’t hot. And it is high though. It’s high. At least they do one of those three things that I recommended before. But you got to do all three of them.

AB: I think what you pay for there now is the \$5,000 televisions.

JS: Yeah there’s about forty-two in there. Inside, outside, on the roof, on the deck, they’re everywhere. Hell, I think they’re going to open a Starbucks in there. They found out there wasn’t one already in there *[Laughs]*.

AB: All right, well thank you so much Joe. We really appreciate your time and your patience with us and your great stories.

LP: So, it's the fifteenth of June, 2007, this is the end of our interview with Joe Sullivan at House Park Bar-B-Que on West Twelfth Street in Austin. This has been Lisa Powell and Andrew Busch conducting the interview.

AB: Thank you, again.

[END]

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