



Charles Poirier
Poirier's Cane Syrup - Youngsville, Louisiana
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Location: Charles Poirier's Residence - Youngsville, Louisiana
Interviewer: Rien Fertel
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Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is March the 2nd, a Monday, 2020, and it's almost 1:30 in the afternoon. I'm in Youngsville, Louisiana, with Mr. Charles Poirier, and I'm going to have him introduce himself, please.

[0:00:20.7]

Charles Poirier: Hey, I'm Charles Poirier from Youngsville, Louisiana.

[0:00:26.0]

Rien Fertel: And tell me your birth date, please, if you don't mind.

[0:00:27.8]

Charles Poirier: February 20, 1973.

[0:00:29.8]

Rien Fertel: First, tell us about Youngsville. We were talking, before we started taping, I grew up just a couple miles from here on the south side of Lafayette, and driving from where I grew up to here, it was very familiar but also unfamiliar because of the changes in this part of town. Can you tell me about Youngsville and its relation to Lafayette and also kind of where you grew up?

[0:01:02.6]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. Well, it was a small town, south side of Lafayette, started growing at a pretty fast pace probably in the mid-[19]80s, and then after 2000, it really took off. It's home.

[0:01:23.1]

Rien Fertel: Where were you born specifically, and where did you grow up?

[0:01:26.5]

Charles Poirier: I was born and raised right here.

[0:01:28.2]

Rien Fertel: So in your home where we are?

[0:01:30.3]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, right where we are, yes.

[0:01:31.9]

Rien Fertel: This was your parents' home?

[0:01:32.6]

Charles Poirier: Correct.

[0:01:32.9]

Rien Fertel: Wow. Tell me about your family and your parents. So we're going to talk about sugar cane today. How far back did that work, did that industry go in your family?

[0:01:45.5]

Charles Poirier: Sugarcane?

[0:01:46.5]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[0:01:47.2]

Charles Poirier: Well, on my dad's side, back to when they were still growing indigo.

[0:01:53.2]

Rien Fertel: Really?

[0:01:55.0]

Charles Poirier: Before sugarcane, yes, in St. Martinville.

[0:01:57.5]

Rien Fertel: Oh, really?

[0:01:58.5]

Charles Poirier: Yes, absolutely.

[0:01:59.2]

Rien Fertel: How many generations is that?

[0:02:02.0]

Charles Poirier: Oh, Rien, I haven't thought about it. They were exiled here in—or they made it here in 1765.

[0:02:11.1]

Rien Fertel: And by “they,” you mean Cajuns.

[0:02:12.8]

Charles Poirier: Yes, well, Acadians then. But, yeah, it goes back pretty far. It was continuous until my dad—my dad and his brother didn't take over when my grandpa left off.

[0:02:30.4]

Rien Fertel: Was there a different family name from the original settlers, or was it Poirier?

[0:02:37.6]

Charles Poirier: It was Poirier, yes.

[0:02:39.5]

Rien Fertel: So they settled out in—

[0:02:39.5]

Charles Poirier: In St. Martinville, yes.

[0:02:43.0]

Rien Fertel: And then how did your family end up kind of closer to the hub city, to Lafayette?

[0:02:49.4]

Charles Poirier: Well, my grandfather—let me see—my grandpa married my grandmother. She was a Poche from Poche Bridge. She inherited some property. Well, I'm sure you know where Poche's is, the country club. That was for her brother. Whenever her parents died, she inherited some property, I don't think she wanted to live there anymore, and so her and my grandpa found some property here and bought it, and here ever since.

[0:03:19.4]

Rien Fertel: So you don't specifically know how many generations your family has been doing sugarcane, but is there one generation that maybe you've heard stories about

credited as like a grandfather, great-grandfather? Do you know stories about them doing sugarcane?

[0:03:38.6]

Charles Poirier: Not much. My great-great-grandfather, Anatole, he grew sugarcane and made syrup also, and I remember Daddy telling me about that years ago. But that's kind of where I had the idea to start with the syrup, was from stories from my dad about him.

[0:03:58.9]

Rien Fertel: What was Anatole's last name?

[0:04:00.9]

Charles Poirier: Poirier, yes.

[0:04:02.5]

Rien Fertel: And what about your grandfather? Did you have a relationship with your grandfather?

[0:04:07.8]

Charles Poirier: Yes. Well, I was nine when he passed away, but, yeah, he used to take me, after he retired, he leased out his property and they'd grow soybeans, and he'd take me—probably before I went to school, he'd take me riding on his little tractor on the headlands, just to check, give me a ride, I guess. But, yeah, I knew him.

[0:04:30.0]

Rien Fertel: What else did he grow? Did he grow sugarcane also here?

[0:04:33.7]

Charles Poirier: He grew sugarcane, cotton, corn. He grew pepper, some okra, I think, just stuff for them to eat, not just a commodity.

[0:04:46.5]

Rien Fertel: And what was his name?

[0:04:49.0]

Charles Poirier: Leopold. Leopold Poirier.

[0:04:51.8]

Rien Fertel: You said your father and uncle did not go into the sugarcane business. What did they do?

[0:04:58.6]

Charles Poirier: They both got off into the dredging industry, yes.

[0:05:02.8]

Rien Fertel: And so that took them out in the Gulf, or in the waters?

[0:05:06.0]

Charles Poirier: All over the southeastern seaboard, well, Florida, heading back South Texas. Every now and again, they'd get some work in the Pacific, on the other end. But, yeah, that's what they did.

[0:05:21.4]

Rien Fertel: So where did you go to school? Where did you go to high school?

[0:05:25.3]

Charles Poirier: I went to Comeaux High School.

[0:05:26.7]

Rien Fertel: You went to Comeaux High School?

[0:05:27.4]

Charles Poirier: I sure did.

[0:05:28.1]

Rien Fertel: Did you ever help the family? After your grandfather passed away, was there still farming going on in the family or on the family property where we are?

[0:05:42.5]

Charles Poirier: Yes. His neighbor across the—or our neighbor across the street, Curtis Decoux, farmed soybeans here.

[0:05:50.0]

Rien Fertel: Were you ever a part of that as a young man?

[0:05:55.0]

Charles Poirier: No, no.

[0:05:56.2]

Rien Fertel: Did you have any interest in farming?

[0:05:57.8]

Charles Poirier: Yes, I did.

[0:05:58.8]

Rien Fertel: And that interest, what did it look like?

[0:06:01.5]

Charles Poirier: Just from what I could tell, you were your own boss, you did your own thing, and I loved that. It's not like working for the man. But as things played out, I ended up working for somebody, and, well, the rest is history. Here I am.

[0:06:30.1]

Rien Fertel: You were telling me a story about there was a local sugarcane factory or mill in the area. Can you tell me about that, any memories or any stories you've heard about that?

[0:06:40.4]

Charles Poirier: Sure. It was the Youngsville Sugar Refinery. It was across the street from the present day—I think it's a Home Bank in Youngsville, near those big silos that were up. It was right—that overgrown area—that was the spot right there. My grandpa used to haul his cane there—or it was hauled by train there until they pulled up the railroad—then he'd haul it himself. Had a few of my—let me see. My dad's older sister, her husband worked for the mill, and he died when I was young, so I never had talks to him about that. That was about it, man. The mill actually did burn in 1969. A boiler blew up and caught afire and burned.

[0:07:40.7]

Rien Fertel: What do you know about the importance of sugarcane to this area, right? Going back to even St. Martinville days, what does that relationship, what has it looked like over the years, either from your point of view or what you know about the history of Acadiana?

[0:08:03.8]

Charles Poirier: Well, you might have to ask me that question again.

[0:08:10.6]

Rien Fertel: How important is the sugarcane industry, or how important has it been to Acadiana, to Lafayette, St. Martinville, Iberia Parish?

[0:08:20.6]

Charles Poirier: Oh, well, *very* important. In a farmer's point of view, it brings the most money compared to rice, soybeans, anything. If you want to make some money, it's in sugarcane.

[0:08:36.5]

Rien Fertel: Still today?

[0:08:37.3]

Charles Poirier: Today, yes.

[0:08:38.1]

Rien Fertel: Really? Even more than rice, yeah.

[0:08:39.9]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yes.

[0:08:40.8]

Rien Fertel: And why is that?

[0:08:42.9]

Charles Poirier: I'm not quite sure. With cane, one season of planting will last you three to four years without having to replant, so that right there is a big plus through expenses. What other reasons, I don't know.

[0:09:08.1]

Rien Fertel: I know it's cultural, it's here, but I didn't know that you can make, just from an acre or whatever, that it's more than any other commodity.

[0:09:16.2]

Charles Poirier: Yes, absolutely. Yes. Matter of fact, a lot of the—I'm sure you might remember that anything west of the Vermilion River was all rice. All that's gone to sugarcane.

[0:09:30.9]

Rien Fertel: Oh, really?

[0:09:31.6]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yes.

[0:09:31.9]

Rien Fertel: Is that in what generation? In the past ten years, twenty years, or further?

[0:09:36.9]

Charles Poirier: Oh, past ten, fifteen, and counting.

[0:09:42.1]

Rien Fertel: So it's still growing, the sugarcane industry?

[0:09:44.2]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yes. It's pushing the rice out.

[0:09:47.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, I didn't know that.

[0:09:48.7]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yeah. Rice is dwindling.

[0:09:51.5]

Rien Fertel: Really? So there's a big premium on sugarcane now.

[0:09:54.5]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yes.

[0:09:55.4]

Rien Fertel: And what are these farmers—we'll talk about your business model, but what you know about them, what do they do? Like, they grow a field of sugarcane.

[0:10:05.0]

Charles Poirier: They grow it. Well, used to, they would plant it, cultivate it, harvest it, and haul it to the mill, and after it's sent to the mill, well, they'd make sugar with it.

[0:10:25.2]

Rien Fertel: And that's the same today?

[0:10:26.2]

Charles Poirier: Yes, absolutely. Now, I know Patout Sugar Mill, they're harvesting all of the farmers' cane cheaper than what the farmers can do it themselves.

[0:10:40.8]

Rien Fertel: So the farmers no longer have to harvest their own cane?

[0:10:44.4]

Charles Poirier: Correct. Through the use of cheap labor.

[0:10:48.6]

Rien Fertel: Cheap labor. So it's not even machines that they—

[0:10:51.3]

Charles Poirier: Well, yeah, it's machines that they—well, you ever passed on Highway 90?

[0:10:56.2]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[0:10:57.3]

Charles Poirier: You see all those combines, all that stuff lined up?

[0:10:58.8]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[0:10:59.5]

Charles Poirier: That's all for Patout. That all goes out in gangs, different parts of the parishes, and they cut.

[0:11:05.4]

Rien Fertel: I was on the Louisiana Sugar Board's website recently, and just talking about the big industry, I think there's twelve mills, factories.

[0:11:19.6]

Charles Poirier: Thirteen.

[0:11:20.1]

Rien Fertel: Thirteen, okay. So there's thirteen in lower Louisiana and southern Louisiana. Do you know, are they buying up farmers and sugarcane fields, or do they rely on independent farmers?

[0:11:38.1]

Charles Poirier: Well, yeah, most of them rely on independent farmers. There are a few of them which are cooperatives, so it's actually farmer-owned. I know Cajun Sugar Mills's like that. I'm not sure which of them, so I don't want to give you any bad info, but, yeah.

[0:12:00.1]

Rien Fertel: So before we get to your business, what did you do after high school?

[0:12:05.1]

Charles Poirier: Actually, my first job was, I was diesel engine mechanic, yes.

[0:12:13.9]

Rien Fertel: Here in town?

[0:12:14.8]

Charles Poirier: Just outside of Youngsville, a small little shop, little mom-and-pop business, and I worked for Mr. Bill Hoyler, I don't know, three years or so. And after that, I started driving eighteen-wheelers. That's what I did. And then I went back, well, almost twenty years now, started working for Lafayette Consolidated Government, and I'm actually a pump mechanic.

[0:12:37.7]

Rien Fertel: I want to ask you about the eighteen-wheelers. Were you regional or national or local?

[0:12:41.1]

Charles Poirier: No, I did both. I used to haul gravel from Baton Rouge up by Slaughter. I'd make three to four loads in a day back to Lafayette. I went doing that, and then I started cross-country, but I only did that for about eight months. I didn't like it.

[0:12:59.7]

Rien Fertel: Why didn't you like it?

[0:13:01.6]

Charles Poirier: Too long from home, way too long from home. And they wouldn't run you across I-10. They'd run you across I-20, I-30, so you wouldn't veer off and come home.

[0:13:14.0]

Rien Fertel: Oh, they would know, so you couldn't stop at home and see your family.

[0:13:17.4]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yeah. Sure. I didn't like that. And I missed Mama, I missed Daddy, so, yeah.

[0:13:22.3]

Rien Fertel: You talked also earlier, you said you like being independent and having that independent business. And I know a lot of truckers, and I think there's a TV show now on Netflix where they talk about the road and independence on the road. Did you get that, even driving locally?

[0:13:39.8]

Charles Poirier: Oh, absolutely, but I think I was lonesome. That's what got me. It's not like you're, "Good morning, Rien," every morning. You don't talk to anybody. You're on that road, and that's a rough life. That's tough.

[0:13:55.5]

Rien Fertel: So then you got a job with the Louisiana parish or Louisiana city government?

[0:14:01.9]

Charles Poirier: Lafayette Consolidated Government, yeah.

[0:14:03.4]

Rien Fertel: And what year was that?

[0:14:05.9]

Charles Poirier: That was 2000.

[0:14:07.8]

Rien Fertel: So what does a day or a week in your life look like for them?

[0:14:16.2]

Charles Poirier: I have a route I check. If I have any problems, I tend to those problems, make sure those stations are up and running.

[0:14:22.5]

Rien Fertel: And what kind of stations are these? What are they?

[0:14:24.3]

Charles Poirier: I take care of water and wastewater pumps. That's what I do.

[0:14:27.6]

Rien Fertel: Making sure the machinery, the engines are working?

[0:14:31.4]

Charles Poirier: The motors, yes, electric motors, yeah.

[0:14:34.0]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:14:34.6]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, all the controls and all that.

[0:14:37.0]

Rien Fertel: And is it tough work? How would you describe the work?

[0:14:40.6]

Charles Poirier: No, it's like any other job. Some weeks it drags on, and other weeks it's busy, like not enough time in the day. So, just like anything else, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. [Laughter]

[0:14:55.6]

Rien Fertel: One utilities question. I'm from Lafayette. I've lived in New Orleans for twenty years. New Orleans is famous, or infamous, for having utilities that always break down. I'm sure you've heard of our Sewerage and Water Board.

[0:15:09.2]

Charles Poirier: Mm-hm. It's a shame.

[0:15:10.5]

Rien Fertel: [Laughter] Does your day job ever look like that?

[0:15:15.1]

Charles Poirier: No, no. Now, sometimes you might have a pumping station that'll fail, but for the most part, our stuff, it's up to par.

[0:15:23.7]

Rien Fertel: It works.

[0:15:24.8]

Charles Poirier: If it was something that was caused by lightning that burned up some electrical controls or something, you can't help that. But, no, not like what you're talking about.

[0:15:34.0]

Rien Fertel: Right, where our water shuts off on an ordinary Tuesday.

[0:15:36.1]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. Like drinking water shutoff?

[0:15:38.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, yeah.

[0:15:39.5]

Charles Poirier: Oh, no, no, no, no, there's none of that. No, no, no.

[0:15:41.9]

Rien Fertel: And they tell you you can't drink water or bathe. [Laughter]

[0:15:44.2]

Charles Poirier: Because I worked at one of our water plants also, and I was the operator there, and I could make a couple of phone calls and find out if ever they lost any pressure in any part of town, but I guarantee it's zero.

[0:15:58.0]

Rien Fertel: It's zero, yeah. Okay. Well, I'm glad that—

[0:16:00.1]

Charles Poirier: They run a tight ship.

[0:16:00.4]

Rien Fertel: —my hometown is better than— [Laughter]

[0:16:02.4]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, you can actually drink the water.

[0:16:05.6]

Rien Fertel: So when did you get into the sugarcane business? How did that start?

[0:16:10.0]

Charles Poirier: That started when my dad passed away. We used to have little talks, and I love old stuff, and I'd ask him and he'd tell me. So when he passed away, I said, "Boy, that'd be a neat little tribute to him." Not tribute, but something to remind me of him.

[0:16:31.3]

Rien Fertel: And remind me his name.

[0:16:32.7]

Charles Poirier: Carroll. So, what was it? I was starting to accumulate a bunch of old cane tractors. I collect old cane tractors, too, and my wife, she'd fuss. She'd raise hell

about me having these things. Well, I don't play golf. I don't play tennis. I don't do any—I don't go to bars and do all that other stuff. So I figure I'm going to do something to get her off my back, so I said, "I'm going to grow a little sugarcane to make a little syrup." So that way I'd have a use for them.

[0:17:04.7]

Rien Fertel: And what year was this?

[0:17:07.5]

Charles Poirier: This was in 2004, early part of 2004, I think. So I just started looking for a little mill. I couldn't find a mill. It seemed like eternity, I looked for eternity, couldn't find anything, and then finally I found a mill. Mama was still alive at that point. But I set it up in the backyard, it was out in the yard, in the open, and I grew just a little bit of cane. Matter of fact, my first little patch was about where you parked your car on the side over there, because my dad always grew some cane for us to chew when we were small, and that's where it was. So, yeah.

[0:17:50.7]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So you've opened up a couple questions here. First, where did you find that mill? How did you find it finally? And tell us about it.

[0:17:58.7]

Charles Poirier: I searched from New Orleans to East Texas, couldn't find a mill. I'd go up north and I'd make special trips to look, to try and find one, and talking to older people where those syrup mills were, and I'd go check, and all that stuff was all gone. So finally one day I said, "I'm going to go talk to my dad's friend, Mr. Pierre Broussard."

So I went over there and I asked him. He said, "I know where there's two of them." And right there in Maurice, just off of—you know where Kirk Road is?

[0:18:34.1]

Rien Fertel: No, what's the—

[0:18:35.6]

Charles Poirier: Robley?

[0:18:35.8]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, Robley.

[0:18:36.6]

Charles Poirier: You know where Robley comes out, it's actually Kirk Road at that point on 92?

[0:18:40.3]

Rien Fertel: Oh, Kirk Road, mm-hm.

[0:18:41.5]

Charles Poirier: That mill was back there. The guy had two of them. He made syrup, but he hadn't done that probably thirty years or so, and they were in the woods. But the mill had a—the tree was probably a good ten, twelve inches in diameter, growing through it, so I had to cut that down to get the mill out. But I did find a mill, yeah.

[0:19:06.7]

Rien Fertel: And that's the mill you still use?

[0:19:06.7]

Charles Poirier: That's the mill.

[0:19:08.9]

Rien Fertel: And how old is the mill?

[0:19:10.3]

Charles Poirier: It's 1904.

[0:19:11.6]

Rien Fertel: Can you tell us—well, I'm going to ask you that later, how it works. You said you grew just a little patch of cane. How do you source that? Where did you get the—how do you grow cane, I mean plant it?

[0:19:26.5]

Charles Poirier: One of our elderly cane farmers around here, he had some, because what Daddy—see, when my dad used to plant, my grandpa kept growing after he quit farming, and my dad had some of that and kept it going. Then once I left home, Daddy didn't grow that for anybody anymore.

So whenever I found some, I planted a little bit right in that same spot where he had planted. There wasn't a driveway there back then. So, anyway, come fall, I would cut—I don't know, man—it might have been thirty stalks. I'd cut it, and Mama would come meet me, and I'd bucket the juice in five-gallon buckets into my Grandmother Poche's, one of her mother's old fifteen-gallon crackling pots. It's old. I'd cook a little bit of syrup in that. And when Mr. Jim found me, I was still using that little pot.

[0:20:28.0]

Rien Fertel: Jim Gossen.

[0:20:29.0]

Charles Poirier: Mm-hm.

[0:20:29.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow. Okay. When you plant sugar, you don't plant it from seed. It's like grass? How do you plant it?

[0:20:37.9]

Charles Poirier: You plant the stalk.

[0:20:39.0]

Rien Fertel: Oh, you plant the stalk in the ground.

[0:20:40.6]

Charles Poirier: Yes, yes.

[0:20:41.2]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And you said it just kind of regenerates?

[0:20:44.9]

Charles Poirier: Yes, absolutely. It grows from the eyes. The eyes is the inner nose on the stalk. There's one 180 degrees from each other every joint.

[0:20:55.8]

Rien Fertel: So you cut everything above that when you go to harvest it?

[0:20:58.6]

Charles Poirier: Yes.

[0:20:59.6]

Rien Fertel: And then it just regenerates the next season?

[0:21:01.4]

Charles Poirier: Yes, it comes back.

[0:21:02.1]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow. Okay. Two more questions, going back. You talked about you and your brother eating cane, and I remember that too.

[0:21:12.2]

Charles Poirier: We'd chew it, you know.

[0:21:13.5]

Rien Fertel: We'd chew it, yeah. I went to school out in Cade, Cade, Louisiana, and it was surrounded by sugarcane fields.

[0:21:22.3]

Charles Poirier: At ESA?

[0:21:23.9]

Rien Fertel: At ESA, which was an old sugarcane plantation. And end of school, we'd stop beside of the road and break some cane off and eat it, steal cane. [Laughter] Can you just tell the story of that, or maybe what that tastes like or—

[0:21:43.9]

Charles Poirier: Sure.

[0:21:44.8]

Rien Fertel: Because I think people not—unless you're born in, like, South Louisiana or the Caribbean, you maybe have never—

[0:21:49.5]

Charles Poirier: No, and most people haven't. No, I can remember getting off the school bus, I can remember coming in here and grabbing a knife, and, matter of fact, one of the Old Hickory knives. You might remember that brand. I've got a bunch of them there. I remember grabbing one of those. I can still remember Mama saying, "Don't cut your fingers or hand off."

I'd go whacking at it. I wasn't very big, probably eight, nine years old. And I'd cut a stalk down and I'd have a smaller knife to peel it. I can remember sitting on the ground right there, and I remember it being cold outside, and I can remember the juice running down my neck, the good stuff.

[0:22:32.2]

Rien Fertel: And you just kind of chew it, chew it, chew it.

[0:22:35.2]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, sure, and spit out the leftovers.

[0:22:40.3]

Rien Fertel: And you talked about the tractors you collect. What was the first tractor, and how many do you have now?

[0:22:47.7]

Charles Poirier: Well, my first one was a 1941 Farmall HV. It was a high-crop that came from Loreauville. That was the first one I did. That was probably around 1991. I was still in high school.

[0:23:04.6]

Rien Fertel: And did you fix it up?

[0:23:08.0]

Charles Poirier: Yes, um-hm, I restored that. Matter of fact, me and my dad did it. And I still do have my grandfather's, the one he bought brand new, that farmed this. I have all his implements. I have all his tools.

[0:23:20.6]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:23:21.3]

Charles Poirier: But, yeah, that was my first one. Then now I think I have five or six, so I'm fixing to finish restoring that one in the shop there.

[0:23:34.3]

Rien Fertel: And do you use them? I know people go to shows, right, like car shows. Do you do that?

[0:23:42.7]

Charles Poirier: Yes, absolutely. I haven't in the past a whole lot. I used to do all that, and I kind of just stopped for a while, and especially with my kids. But, yeah, this one I do plan on it, because I'm a handful of years from retirement, so I'm going to need something to do.

[0:24:02.5]

Rien Fertel: You said that Jim Gossen visited you. How did he find you? How did he hear about you?

[0:24:08.9]

Charles Poirier: Mr. Jim. Let's see. My wife, she was working at a doctor's office, and she brought a couple bottles to put on their table in their break room, and so I know she grabbed some. She didn't say anything. But people liked it, but nothing.

So one day, she said Roxanne Breaux, which is Mr. Jim's sister-in-law, that's Miss Diane's sister, I think, she told Jessie, she said, "You need to give me one of these bottles. I want to give it to my brother-in-law. He's a foodie," and this and that.

So I give her another bottle, said, "Whatever."

So, I don't know, man, about three or four months later, I get a phone call, and this guy's asking me about some syrup, and he says, "I'd like to come meet you," and very anxious. I was like, "Wow." But very nice, though. So like, "Wow."

So he actually came and met me probably a week or so later, and he talked and I showed him what I was doing. And he told me, he said, "I'll buy whatever you can make," which wasn't much then. Still isn't much now, but it's a lot more now.

[0:25:31.3]

Rien Fertel: And you were a couple years into it then?

[0:25:33.4]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, I was probably three or four years into it. But, like I said, this was just for us. I'd give it away to family and friends and whoever wanted some.

Well, I was just thinking to myself, said, "Man, what's he going to do with this?" And, I'm used to seeing people making money on other people, so I thought that's what he was going to do. And I was *so very wrong*.

So I'd have a batch done, he'd say, "Well, I want—," however much of it. And I'd say, "Sure." But he didn't want to cut into what I was doing. So every time I'd have some done, he'd come get it, or I'd stock it up for him, he'd come get it all at once. And little did I know, he was handing out to chefs and whatnot and spreading the word, so, yes.

[0:26:24.9]

Rien Fertel: And who was the first chef, or the first chefs, to call you up and ask for more?

[0:26:30.6]

Charles Poirier: Lisa White.

[0:26:31.9]

Rien Fertel: And tell us about how that happened and where she was.

[0:26:34.9]

Charles Poirier: Let me see.

[0:26:37.7]

Rien Fertel: I think she was at Willa Jean then.

[0:26:39.4]

Charles Poirier: She was at Dominica.

[0:26:40.8]

Rien Fertel: Oh, she was at Dominica. Even before. Wow.

[0:26:42.9]

Charles Poirier: She was at Dominica. But another one—and I think she was the first one actually to get some from me, she called me and asked me how could she get some, and this and that, and praising it and all that. So, yeah, I told her, I said, “If you want some, you’ll have to wait till next year, and just give me a call then.”

And I think the first time I met Lisa, the first time she ever came to pick up some, my little—the syrup—the sugarhouse was still new, and Lisa came and bought—I forget what she got that year—maybe ten gallons. And just steadily grew from there.

[0:27:22.5]

Rien Fertel: Wow. So for those people who don’t have a bottle of syrup in their pantry like we all do growing up down here. And even in New Orleans, it’s a rarity. A lot of people don’t know what it is. They don’t use it. What did you grow up using it for and on, and what do people down here, how do they use it?

[0:27:47.5]

Charles Poirier: Growing up, Mom and Daddy, they got Steen's, because I have some really old Steen's cans, probably back from the early [19]60s, I would guess. But I remember Mama buying a lot of T.J. Blackburn. You remember that one?

[0:28:08.0]

Rien Fertel: I've seen old cans.

[0:28:09.8]

Charles Poirier: Out of Jefferson, Texas, yeah. It's actually mixed, so it's corn syrup and cane. Really good, though, and that's more or less what I grew up on. But Mama—

[0:28:24.7]

Rien Fertel: Was it on pancakes, or what was it on?

[0:28:27.1]

Charles Poirier: Yes, pancakes and waffles. She'd make popcorn balls. What else she would use? I'm getting old, Rien. Forgive me. She'd use it on something else.

[0:28:39.9]

Rien Fertel: Would you have cornmeal and milk, like coush-coush?

[0:28:43.7]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yes, absolutely. Bruh, I had that once a week.

[0:28:45.6]

Rien Fertel: Oh, really?

[0:28:46.4]

Charles Poirier: Well, Mama's—there was a difference between real coush-coush and coush-coush people make with cornbread.

[0:28:57.9]

Rien Fertel: Oh, tell me the difference. I probably never had the real.

[0:29:00.9]

Charles Poirier: Coush-coush, as I know it—if I'd have known, my sister could have fixed you some—is actually smothered white cornmeal. Not smothered—sorry—steamed.

[0:29:14.9]

Rien Fertel: Steamed?

[0:29:15.6]

Charles Poirier: Yes, in a black pot. And I've tried it a few times. Mine comes out lumpy and this. But it's actually really good, and it's totally different.

[0:29:25.1]

Rien Fertel: And what's the more modern way or the easier way?

[0:29:28.2]

Charles Poirier: Cornbread, and you break up the cornbread in some milk, and there you go.

[0:29:32.5]

Rien Fertel: And then you pour syrup on top?

[0:29:35.4]

Charles Poirier: Yes. So break it up, syrup, then add some milk. Yeah, that's all. Well, I eat it either way. It doesn't matter. I like it.

[0:29:44.0]

Rien Fertel: Do you still have it?

[0:29:44.7]

Charles Poirier: What's that?

[0:29:46.3]

Rien Fertel: Do you still eat that?

[0:29:46.9]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

[0:29:48.0]

Rien Fertel: And growing up, would you have it—you said once a week. Was it like on weekends?

[0:29:52.1]

Charles Poirier: No, sometimes if we had a lot of some school activities, because I'm one of seven, Mama would fix that when we'd get home, coush-coush, and that would be our meal, yeah. Just once a week. My mom was a fine cook too.

[0:30:11.4]

Rien Fertel: And what was her name, if you could?

[0:30:12.6]

Charles Poirier: Margaret. Margaret Arnaud. Arnaud Poirier. Matter of fact, she's one of the descendants of Jacques Arnaud, Arnaudville.

[0:30:21.0]

Rien Fertel: Oh, who founded Arnaudville. Wow. So your roots are very deep on both side of your family.

[0:30:26.8]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yeah, um-hm.

[0:30:28.0]

Rien Fertel: Wow. That's really incredible. So I'm guessing it just built up from there and more and more chefs found you.

[0:30:36.3]

Charles Poirier: Yes, it kept on going.

[0:30:37.5]

Rien Fertel: So Lisa White was in New Orleans at Dominica, then Willa Jean. Was it mostly New Orleans chefs, or was it chefs—

[0:30:43.6]

Charles Poirier: At first it was mostly New Orleans, and then I'd get some Texas, Austin, then started Washington State and Tennessee and Chicago. Now I'm a lot of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida. So, yes, it's kind of spreading everywhere now, which is good, and not just in one spot.

[0:31:14.4]

Rien Fertel: How do they find you? Is it word of mouth or online?

[0:31:17.6]

Charles Poirier: Magazines. The magazine, the articles, yes. *Southern Living*. Hell, Rien, there was a few of them that have been written, whatnot, I don't even know about. So it's like—I'd get a bunch—

[0:31:31.6]

Rien Fertel: Right. [Laughter]

[0:31:32.8]

Charles Poirier: I'll get a spurt of phone calls and people inquiring about it, and I'm like, "How'd you hear about me?"

She's like, "Well, it's in this magazine I just got."

I said, "Magazine?"

She said, "Yeah, magazine I just got."

I'm like, "Wow." There will come about fifty phone calls. And I have to turn them down, so that's not too good.

[0:31:51.2]

Rien Fertel: Right. And that was my next question. So you have to turn them down because you're still limited in your—

[0:31:55.5]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, absolutely.

[0:31:56.7]

Rien Fertel: How have you expanded, though, since that 2004-2005 batch?

[0:32:00.6]

Charles Poirier: Well, then was fifteen gallons of juice, and then now it's 120 gallons of juice in one batch, so it's grown a lot. It's probably the most I want to expand. That's about it, because I'm pushing it now. Because, I don't know, I don't know if it's worth you start hiring people and start with all the other stuff. It's like I'm probably going to end up hating it, so I think I'm going to keep it the way it is.

[0:32:32.1]

Rien Fertel: And how much cane do you grow? Like how much cane equals a gallon, and how much cane are you growing now?

[0:32:39.4]

Charles Poirier: Well, one acre of cane, on a decent year, would probably give you 250 or so gallons of syrup, about. That's a decent year. A good year, you might get 275, 300.

So, you know, Mother Nature. So now I think I've got about an acre and a quarter growing.

[0:33:09.7]

Rien Fertel: And is it all one variety of cane, and is it the same cane?

[0:33:14.0]

Charles Poirier: No, I have different varieties. I have varieties that are mature early, so the sucrose content'll come up, or start getting high, so your sugar will start getting sweet early in the season.

[0:33:27.8]

Rien Fertel: And can you talk about the season?

[0:33:29.0]

Charles Poirier: Sure. So the season'll start usually mid-September through the first killing freeze in either December—well, this year was November, which wasn't good. Other years, I made syrup up to January 20th before we got a good freeze.

But back to the varieties, so I'll plant some, I'll plant a third of my cane that'll mature early, I'll plant another third that matures midseason, because the one that matures early, as it continues to mature, the sucrose will drop off, so your yields get low. So they're good at first, then start dropping off. So when I'm done with them, I'll start

with that midseason one, and as the cold weather starts coming, more and more I have another variety that can take the cold.

[0:34:29.4]

Rien Fertel: And the varieties, do they taste different, too, or have a different color?

[0:34:32.4]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. My early-maturing one is actually a green cane. It's really sweet. There's not a lot of all flavors in it, so it's mostly sweet. Now, my midseason one, yeah, it's—and, Rien, I can't even explain the taste, but it's actually a purple cane, and my late-maturing is a purple cane also. Plus, I grow a few other heirloom varieties, some ribbon cane, and I have some POJ, and those are large-barrel canes. Those are huge, but the sucrose is really low.

So over the years, say back from—we've been having research stations here, at Houma, LSU. Way back, LSU didn't—I don't know when they started that one. Meridian, Mississippi, Canal Point, Florida. But they've been growing these different varieties and breeding them to where they end up with a good hearty sweet cane. There's a million things that can go wrong with a crop.

[0:35:51.8]

Rien Fertel: And I want ask about that. So these heirloom varieties, does that mean that generations ago, cane had less juice in it, less yield?

[0:36:01.4]

Charles Poirier: Well, actually, one stalk then would equal probably four stalks now, because back then, the cane was so big, you'd get a hard wind, it would not only knock the cane down, it would break it. Once it's broken, you can't do anything with it, because it would sour.

[0:36:26.0]

Rien Fertel: And where did you get these heirloom varieties?

[0:36:28.6]

Charles Poirier: People around here. Like I said, that old cane farmer I know, Mr. Guillot, he had some. And I'd find some here in town, people in their backyards, yeah. You see a little patch of it growing, it's like I'd wait until the time was right, and I'd go talk to them, usually older people who grew up cutting that, or Mom and Dad had to sharecrop this stuff or whatever, so they just kept a little of it going. And I'd stop and ask if I could get a stalk, and I would bring it home and plant it.

[0:37:00.3]

Rien Fertel: So you could grow from a stalk. You don't need the bottom part?

[0:37:02.3]

Charles Poirier: No, no, correct, you can grow from a stalk.

[0:37:05.4]

Rien Fertel: So tell me about the—you said many things that can go wrong in growing cane. I know weather, you talked about that. What can go wrong, and what has gone wrong? Has there been a really bad season?

[0:37:21.1]

Charles Poirier: Well, no. Well, this season here, we got that real early freeze, so I finished up mine just in time. Or I was nearing the end just in time. It froze so bad, the cane was dying. It didn't freeze it bad enough to rupture the stalks so it would start fermenting, it didn't do that, but it killed it. By the time the farmers were able to get it out of their fields, the tops of the cane was rotting off, was falling off.

[0:37:56.8]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:37:57.8]

Charles Poirier: And I think it brought normally a ton of cane recent prices would bring thirty to thirty-eight dollars a ton, and they ended up getting like \$2.50 a ton. Yeah, that's not good.

[0:38:10.7]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:38:12.0]

Charles Poirier: You have diseases and cane borers and weather.

[0:38:17.8]

Rien Fertel: So we talked about, like, the big cane growers and what they do, bring it to the factories, to the mills. You talked about the seasonality, but can you talk about your process from beginning to end?

[0:38:35.9]

Charles Poirier: Sure. Well, as you know, I grow it, fertilize it, cultivate it. I do have to spray for borers. I got caught one time. I was starting to find some cane borers in the crop, and you can't have that. Once they start, they'll decimate the whole thing.

[0:38:56.9]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[0:38:57.4]

Charles Poirier: So I do have to spray for them. But, yeah, normally, I would cut a batch, cut a ton, like on a Thursday and a Friday, get that ready for Saturday. I'll mill it and cook it on Saturday, and then I'll usually bottle it on Sunday. So I've got a busy week during the season.

[0:39:19.0]

Rien Fertel: What does the crushing and cooking process look like?

[0:39:25.1]

Charles Poirier: Well, it's still all done by hand, so you feed all the cane through a cane mill, it's a press, and usually, depends on the variety, a ton of cane will give you about 120 gallons of juice. It's fed by hand. The bagasse will come out the other side of the mill. That's loaded on to a trailer.

[0:39:50.1]

Rien Fertel: Can you describe what that is, the bagasse?

[0:39:53.1]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. It's the—well, I'm not going to say unusable. It's the leftovers of the cane after you extract all the juice out of it. So, yeah, I'm extracting probably about eighty-four to eighty-six percent of the juice.

[0:40:08.5]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow.

[0:40:10.0]

Charles Poirier: So there's not much left in it. But that's loaded onto a trailer, and a friend of mine comes and picks it up and feeds that to his cattle.

[0:40:18.2]

Rien Fertel: The bagasse?

[0:40:19.2]

Charles Poirier: Yes.

[0:40:19.7]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow.

[0:40:20.1]

Charles Poirier: Because it's fresh, you know.

[0:40:21.5]

Rien Fertel: So it is, like, really sustainable, the way you use it.

[0:40:23.5]

Charles Poirier: Oh, yeah, absolutely. The only thing is, fewer and fewer people around here are raising livestock. I had a pretty good little—not a scare, but my dad's friend, Mr. Romero, he was getting it. I'd bring it to him. He was ninety-one or ninety-two and decided he had to stop the cattle. So that one year he wasn't taking it, I had nobody to bring it to. So I had to pile it up in the back. I'd spread it out, try and dry it out as best I

could, and then I'd wait till it dried up enough, and I'd burn it. That's the only thing you can do with it.

[0:41:02.7]

Rien Fertel: I want to ask one question about burning, and then I have a couple questions about the process. So for those who grew up in South Louisiana or if you've visited South Louisiana at certain times, I guess in the fall, right, or in the winter, you see cane fields on fire, right?

[0:41:26.4]

Charles Poirier: Um-hm.

[0:41:27.6]

Rien Fertel: What are farmers—or do you ever do that? What is that part in the process?

[0:41:31.8]

Charles Poirier: Well, they're burning the fodder of the cane, which is the leaves and the tops and whatever's not usable.

[0:41:40.3]

Rien Fertel: So they do that before harvesting.

[0:41:42.3]

Charles Poirier: Before harvesting. That way, you're not hauling all of that, quote, unquote, *trash* to the mill, because it has no value. And they tried years ago—Austoft, which is a manufacturer from Australia, built those billet combines that would cut cane into billets and not whole stalk, like it's been done down here for since the [19]30s and the [19]40s.

[0:42:13.6]

Rien Fertel: Right. And you see kind of the big—they look like—

[0:42:16.5]

Charles Poirier: They're huge, yeah.

[0:42:17.5]

Rien Fertel: Huge trailers that have huge—they look like a giant bathtub, I guess, that you can just pull tons and tons of cane.

[0:42:25.7]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, they load that. Correct. Years ago, you'd have a cane cutter that would cut a row of cane at a time. It would finish up that row, it'd come around the next row, and it would take the cane and put it on top of itself on a heap row. Then they would come behind that. So you cut the whole field. So two rows would make one heap of cane. After it was all cut, they would burn it, and they'd burn the trash, the fodder that's on the cane, in heap rows. And then after that, they would come with a cane loader, load it in the

carts, the carts would come and they'd pile it in a stockpile and wait for the eighteen-wheelers or whatever to come get it. They'd load it again. Well, that Austoft from Australia, they came out with a billet cutter, it cuts it all in short little pieces and loads it as it's cutting, and those tractors, hauling those carts, will pull up alongside an eighteen-wheeler and hydraulically dump that cart into that trailer, that eighteen-wheeler, and they haul it.

[0:43:31.9]

Rien Fertel: So that's what I'm familiar with.

[0:43:33.0]

Charles Poirier: Yes. You cut out a whole bunch of steps using those billet cutters, yes.

[0:43:39.1]

Rien Fertel: So going back to the process, you've pressed the cane, you have the juice, and then do you boil the juice? What does that process look like?

[0:43:51.5]

Charles Poirier: So you start heating the juice and the heat will make all of the impurities rise to the top, and then you start skimming that. The first impurities that'll come up are the black stuff, which is spores that's on the cane. That will come up first, and then once that clears up, you'll start seeing wax, and that just comes off like almost a

clearish white. Then once that's off, it start get turning green, and that's the chlorophyll that's in the juice.

[0:44:27.0]

Rien Fertel: And how long does that process last?

[0:44:29.2]

Charles Poirier: The skimming? You skim a good bit to get the impurities out in the beginning. Probably about—depends how fast you're pushing the fire or how hard you're pushing it. Probably about thirty minutes. But then after that, you still skim throughout the whole cooking process, which is about four and a half hours.

[0:44:50.9]

Rien Fertel: Oh, wow.

[0:44:52.0]

Charles Poirier: Because you have to skim the foam out, because you still have impurities in there, just they're not coming out because it takes more heat for them to start coming up. So it'll clear up, then you have clear foam, and then about thirty minutes before the end, you'll start getting a little green tint to it again, and that's some of the chlorophyll that's left, and you do have to get that out.

[0:45:15.4]

Rien Fertel: Wow. And what do you do with the skimmed-off portions? Do you just toss it?

[0:45:20.7]

Charles Poirier: I toss it, yeah.

[0:45:22.0]

Rien Fertel: So before you bottle it, do you have to let it cool down completely, or can you bottle it when it's—?

[0:45:27.7]

Charles Poirier: You can bottle it hot. I don't have enough time in the day to bottle it hot, so what I have to do is let it sit. Either the next day or three days from then, whenever I feel like it, and then I'll reheat it, get it back up to 180, 190 degrees, and I'll bottle it.

[0:45:43.9]

Rien Fertel: Because it doesn't start to solidify? No, it doesn't do that. Why do you have to reheat it?

[0:45:47.4]

Charles Poirier: Well, it needs to be bottled hot, just like preserves.

[0:45:50.7]

Rien Fertel: Oh, it does need—right, right, right. Safety's sake, right. And what was I going to ask? Are you doing most of this work on your own most of the time?

[0:46:02.5]

Charles Poirier: Most of the time, yes.

[0:46:04.6]

Rien Fertel: Wow. So do you take time off your Lafayette job when you—?

[0:46:10.8]

Charles Poirier: I do. I do.

[0:46:13.2]

Rien Fertel: And so they know that that's that—

[0:46:14.6]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, it's my vacation time.

[0:46:16.4]

Rien Fertel: Oh, it's your vacation time.

[0:46:18.2]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, which I'm starting to accrue a lot of vacation time. I'm getting a few years in there, so, yeah.

[0:46:23.5]

Rien Fertel: So you use it during the harvest season?

[0:46:25.2]

Charles Poirier: Sure.

[0:46:27.7]

Rien Fertel: Do you ever travel to taste how chefs are using the syrup?

[0:46:32.5]

Charles Poirier: Absolutely. I do.

[0:46:35.1]

Rien Fertel: And what have you seen that really sticks out, like what dishes? And is it always dessert, or do they do other things with it?

[0:46:44.7]

Charles Poirier: Man, they've done all kind of stuff, from barbecue. I've seen one of the guys, well, I guess a home chef, but he would marinate whatever he was barbecuing with syrup and all this pepper and salt and all that stuff, and he'd grill it real slow, or barbecue it real slow, or smoke—because I've got to be careful how I say that. And then towards the end, he would add a little bit more just to where it would not burn, but just to caramelize it a little bit more, and he'd pull it off, and that was so good.

Like Willa Jean does the cornbread, that's outrageous. That's great. Some of the bars, I've had a few old fashioned with it, and that's really good. I'm missing a lot of stuff here.

[0:47:44.9]

Rien Fertel: Did you ever think that it would take off like this?

[0:47:47.4]

Charles Poirier: Hell, no. No, I sure didn't. Matter of fact, when I first started doing it, I had people criticizing me for messing with that, and then, finally—

[0:48:00.2]

Rien Fertel: For messing with what?

[0:48:01.1]

Charles Poirier: For starting with the syrup. Just people I know, not family.

[0:48:06.7]

Rien Fertel: Oh. Like, “What are you doing this for?”

[0:48:10.2]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. “Why are you fooling with that?” But, like, “Why?” Man, it’s giving me something to do and, plus, I enjoy that, and, plus, all that stuff, it’s being lost. You can’t just go anywhere anymore and say, “Hey, find me somebody who could make some cane syrup.” It’s like it doesn’t exist.

[0:48:31.9]

Rien Fertel: Is there anyone? Have you heard of anyone down here?

[0:48:33.7]

Charles Poirier: Not around here. There’s another guy who invited me two years ago— he’s just in Milton there. He called me for some advice, and I gave it. The following season, I went. He invited me to go, he cooked a big gumbo, and he’s got a nice little place. So he didn’t use my advice. And, well, so—

[0:48:56.0]

Rien Fertel: But he was trying to make syrup?

[0:48:58.6]

Charles Poirier: Yeah.

[0:49:03.4]

Rien Fertel: Can you talk about—I don't want you to badmouth the big company in town [Laughter], but, like, what their sugarcane tastes—how is it different from yours, whether in process or taste? Or how is yours different from what we can buy at a grocery? We can't buy yours at a grocery. Or we can buy yours in some grocery stores, very specialty grocery stores.

[0:49:33.3]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. Mine—so if I were to give you a piece of cane, I would cut you up a piece for you to chew, you would chew it, and tomorrow I would make some syrup with that same cane, and what you would taste is that same taste the day before times 100, basically, plus a little bit more caramelization. That's my best way to describe it. Mine is made with juice, nothing else. I'm not inverting brown sugar, I'm not doing any of that stuff.

[0:50:20.1]

Rien Fertel: No coloring or—

[0:50:21.2]

Charles Poirier: None of that stuff. That's right. That's right.

[0:50:24.8]

Rien Fertel: Just a couple more questions. Was there ever a point as it kept expanding where you said—and I know you've said you've reached a point now—but was there ever a point where it felt like too much or it felt like it wasn't what you wanted to do?

[0:50:40.3]

Charles Poirier: Oh, absolutely. Well, my batches always came out good, but sometimes you get tired. Just last year—was it last year? Yeah, last year I was probably doing fifty to sixty hours a week in overtime—sorry, I get paid every two weeks, but I was doing probably thirty hours a week overtime. And it started right when the season started for me, and it was like, “Man, this isn't good.” So that was a little trying. But did I want to give up? No. I do have people waiting on some of that stuff, so you can't stop. I don't like to let anybody down.

[0:51:24.7]

Rien Fertel: So you said you're looking forward to retiring in a few years from Lafayette Consolidated Government. What do you want your life to look like then?

[0:51:40.0]

Charles Poirier: Then?

[0:51:42.5]

Rien Fertel: Or, do you plan to keep doing the syrup?

[0:51:44.6]

Charles Poirier: Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely. Oh, that's probably when I'll enjoy it the most, because I can just go out there, Monday through Thursday, cut a few hundred pounds each day, and then come Friday, get somebody to help me mill it, and there's my week. My week's done. Then that will last me for at least three, three and a half months. So it'll give me something to do, and, hell, make a little cash while you're at it.

[0:52:10.2]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah. We've talked about how this, besides you, has largely disappeared. Does that mean that back in the day, families would do this?

[0:52:24.7]

Charles Poirier: Oh, absolutely.

[0:52:26.0]

Rien Fertel: So they'd have a—well, they'd do it in a smaller kettle?

[0:52:29.9]

Charles Poirier: Well, it depends on how far you go back. Back in the day, if there wasn't a syrup mill, similar as a miller, one who would grind corn and make cornmeal and whatnot, well, if you didn't have anybody in your area that did that, you didn't have that, you didn't eat that. So if you didn't have anybody growing cane or somebody cooking it, you didn't have any sweetener, because the white sugar didn't exist. Only the wealthy had white sugar.

[0:53:00.7]

Rien Fertel: So you'd have syrup before it was refined and all that stuff.

[0:53:04.8]

Charles Poirier: Sure. Absolutely.

[0:53:06.4]

Rien Fertel: Have you met any old-timers in the area who have had your syrup and tell you they remember when—

[0:53:15.3]

Charles Poirier: Yes, oh, yes, quite a few of them.

[0:53:17.4]

Rien Fertel: What do they say?

[0:53:18.4]

Charles Poirier: Well, they said it tastes just like the stuff from years ago. That's exactly what they would say. Even what I would give them was actually heirloom cane, sucrose is sucrose. I've always thought about—so, yeah, that is the first thing out of their mouth, “Oh, it tastes just like the old times.” And that makes you feel good.

[0:53:43.0]

Rien Fertel: Can you expand the heirloom cane?

[0:53:46.6]

Charles Poirier: You could. It's even more susceptible to disease. I had to quit growing a few varieties because it was starting to leech over to my newer cane, and you don't want that because you lose everything, plus I don't want to spread anything to these cane farmers. So, yeah, you got to be careful.

[0:54:06.8]

Rien Fertel: And because you've become an expert in a short time on cane and cane varieties, have any scientists, any universities come to talk to you or look at what you have, that you've gotten from people's backyards, or from people's farms?

[0:54:24.3]

Charles Poirier: No.

[0:54:25.4]

Rien Fertel: Because you have like a little museum, a collection of cane that doesn't exist anywhere. Because all these cane fields are going to be very mono crop, I'm guessing, right, the same variety?

[0:54:36.6]

Charles Poirier: Well, there's literally thousands of varieties of sugarcane. There's a lot. Just over all the years, they kept on grafting—not grafting, but cross-pollinating the cane and doing this and that, and they kept making it better and better. And what we have now is the best. There's nothing—I know people don't like to hear *hybrid*. Sugarcane, that was brought over by the Jesuit priests from Dominican Islands or wherever they came from years ago, or China, that was probably a hybrid, just it wasn't crossed by human hands.

[0:55:21.2]

Rien Fertel: Right. But we think of it as original.

[0:55:25.0]

Charles Poirier: Correct, yes, because that's all that they knew. But in my opinion, the newer varieties, that old stuff, doesn't add up to it, not at all.

[0:55:42.7]

Rien Fertel: To what you do?

[0:55:44.0]

Charles Poirier: To the hybrid, to the new ones, yeah. And when I first started, it was nothing—all I made syrup with was the old varieties, and then you start seeing there's one of them you have to plant it every year, doesn't come back from stubble very well. There was another time I grew a variety, if I can remember the—I can't remember the variety now. I have it written down. But it started making these black whips, it looked like an antenna, that would grow out of the cane, and, boy, if you'd bump these—

[0:56:14.0]

Rien Fertel: Out of the stalk?

[0:56:14.6]

Charles Poirier: Out of the stalk. You'd bump it like that, these little black things would fly off. You've seen somebody light a torch?

[0:56:21.5]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[0:56:22.6]

Charles Poirier: You see the little black—that soot?

[0:56:26.0]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[0:56:26.9]

Charles Poirier: Well, I called an old friend of mine, Harold Schexnayder out of White Castle, and he actually worked for a Cora, Texas sugar mill. I told him what that cane was doing. I actually got that seed from him. He told me, he said, “Get it out the field.” Those spores were spreading to everything else, and they were all starting to grow that black whip, and it’ll actually kill the cane. It grows into the roots.

[0:56:52.3]

Rien Fertel: Oh, it was a disease?

[0:56:53.9]

Charles Poirier: It was a disease.

[0:56:54.4]

Rien Fertel: Wow!

[0:56:55.7]

Charles Poirier: So you've got to be careful what you—

[0:56:58.0]

Rien Fertel: And that was an old variety that you had?

[0:56:59.4]

Charles Poirier: That was an old variety. That's one of the reasons they quit growing it. So they'll cross this stuff and, like anything else, like us on medicine, they don't know what it's going to do until you try it. But that's what it did, and that made a beautiful light-colored syrup, but I had to let it go.

[0:57:21.0]

Rien Fertel: Do they taste a little different year to year?

[0:57:24.5]

Charles Poirier: Yeah, depends on your amount of rainfall.

[0:57:27.6]

Rien Fertel: Do you keep a little bit of each year to—

[0:57:31.2]

Charles Poirier: I do. I have a few.

[0:57:36.0]

Rien Fertel: Like wine collectors do, like this is—

[0:57:37.8]

Charles Poirier: Well, man, I should've. There was a bunch of years people'll kind of beg you for some, and it's, like, "Why am I going to hang on to this for? Just give it to them." So I have a bottle from 2010, I think, it's in the cabinet right there. And I kept a gallon this year, it's that one up there. I have that little one, but that's about it. No, I probably should've, but, no, I didn't.

[0:58:05.3]

Rien Fertel: So what do you think the future of what you do is? You want to keep doing it, and you hope to be able to maybe not expand, you said, but keep doing it post-retirement.

[0:58:25.8]

Charles Poirier: My biggest thing, I'll probably—I didn't tell you that. I'll probably—I've had phone calls, probably fifteen different people I've shown how to do this to.

[0:58:38.2]

Rien Fertel: Oh, well, tell me. That's interesting. Who are they?

[0:58:40.7]

Charles Poirier: I've had a couple of guys from Florida, down here, but Florida, Georgia, Alabama, some in Mississippi, I've had a few in Louisiana, another guy on the other side of—near the Sabine River by Lake Charles.

[0:59:02.1]

Rien Fertel: Are any of them doing it actively?

[0:59:05.3]

Charles Poirier: Yeah. They found little mills, or they had a mill and just want to get started, and they called me, and whatever I know, I'll give them. But, yeah, that's been good. That's been better than the moneymaking aspect of it.

[0:59:22.2]

Rien Fertel: That's amazing. What does that feel like? Why do you say that?

[0:59:24.6]

Charles Poirier: Well, because you're helping somebody. That's what we're here for. We're not here to try and cut the other one's throat, like a lot what goes on now. So if you can help somebody, do it, because that goes a long ways.

[0:59:37.9]

Rien Fertel: I think just one more question, and I should have asked this earlier, but was there anyone for you to call when you started this fifteen years ago?

[0:59:45.1]

Charles Poirier: No, no, no.

[0:59:46.9]

Rien Fertel: You couldn't go watch or anything?

[0:59:48.7]

Charles Poirier: No. After I'd started, I did it probably two or three years, and then I talked to Mr. Harold Schexnayder, like I said, in White Castle, and he invited me over, and everything I was doing was good. There was something, I think it was my second or third season that I went and paid him a visit, and he told me, he said, "Be over here five in the morning." And, like, "You know where it's at. It's south of Baton Rouge, right down the road from Nottoway Plantation." Well, I got over there, and, hell, he worked the hell out of me, feeding that mill and—

[1:00:30.4]

Rien Fertel: Is he a big-time sugar farmer?

[1:00:33.0]

Charles Poirier: No, he's actually retired. Mr. Harold, then he was in his early eighties, he's ninety-one now or so, but he was actually a chemist at a sugar mill. The man, he's got his shit together. He knows. You can ask him about a variety of cane and he'll tell you. He'll tell you its parents, this and—I mean, he can just break it down. He's good.

[1:01:00.8]

Rien Fertel: And so what did he teach you when you went and visited him?

[1:01:03.1]

Charles Poirier: Just to show me how his mill was, how everything was set up, but very informative, though. And since then, just about probably every two or three years, he'll come across another variety. One of the research stations will take out again and grow a little bit. He'll give me some, to try it. If I like it, keep on growing it. But, like I said, you get diseases that'll pop out, and it's like, "Nuh-uh, can't have it." But you can try it every now and again.

[1:01:35.0]

Rien Fertel: I want to thank you for taking part and talking.

[1:01:38.5]

Charles Poirier: No problem. I enjoyed having you, man.

[End of Interview]