

RAY COMEAUX
Owner – Comeaux’s Inc. – Breaux Bridge, LA
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Date: January 22, 2009
Location: Comeaux’s Inc., office
Interviewer: Mary Beth Lasseter
Length: 74 minutes
Project: Boudin Trail

[Begin Ray Comeaux-1]

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Mary Beth Lasseter: All right; this is Mary Beth Lasseter. Today is Thursday, January 22, 2009 and I'm in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana talking to Mr. Ray Comeaux. Could you please introduce yourself, Ray?

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Ray Comeaux: Hi; I'm Ray Comeaux, President of Comeaux Incorporated since 1980. I've been blessed with the fact that my father turned over the business to--to my self and a big task, but we take a lot of pride in what we do and I'm just proud to keep up doing what he did and the way he did it--the quality of what he did.

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MBL: Can you tell me what you do here?

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RC: We manufacture 123 different products here; one of the main products we produce is boudin, but in a lot of different varieties. We make a pork, a crawfish, a seafood, an alligator, a turkey and in those varieties some is mild, original, and extra hot, so we make quite--quite a bit and we want to call it boudin world, you know. But it's--it's product that's really brought us a long way. There's a lot of interest, a lot of--lot of competition; the mainstay is keep quality control, keep making it the same way and I've caught myself a few times telling people if you

don't like it today you won't like it tomorrow 'cause we make it the same. But I should change that and say if you like it today you're going to like it tomorrow 'cause it's always the same.

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MBL: Tell me a little bit about your family history and how you got into this business and your recipe if you don't mind?

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RC: Okay; my--my mother is Eula Mae Comeaux Ramiro--or Ramiro Comeaux and my father is Frank Comeaux, no middle initial, from Scott, Louisiana--born in Scott. He was a fireman and a carpenter all his life and but in his younger days he worked as a butcher in some of the local slaughterhouses and what have you. And he associated with some well known people in Lafayette; the LaBeuf's had a supermarket in Lafayette and he worked for them on his off days as fireman. And they--they really pressured him; I think they liked him a lot. They were good friends and they talked him into taking over a grocery store. And this was a little bitty grocery store at the corner of McKinley and General Mouton in Lafayette by UL and we were kids then. But the store was truthfully a hole in the wall; it was old. But there's so much nostalgia with the store and the--the atmosphere of it. People would come in to visit my parents you know what I mean and that's really what the whole trade was about. They'd just come in and visit. Lagniappe was always getting something good, something a little special you know. And my mother was the type and all the UL students that would come into the store, she'd see them with a fever blister on their lip. "Child, let me tell you how to take care of that," and she would give them all the little things, you know you put vinegar on it or you put this and that, and so she was like a

mom to a lot of these college students. And they ran the store from 1967 to 1980, so there was a lot of kids in their path than came through the store.

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One of the things that I really believe that made their business catapult because my father didn't believe in advertising; it was a small store, no radio, no TV--word of mouth. And it was one of these stores where you went in there and it was--you were recognized when you walked in the store and when you left—"please tell your friends; thank you; come back" type thing which seems to be somewhat gone these days you know. But we try to adhere to it still; even in the business I'm in right now, we're wholesaling and--and shipping out of state and what have you. We have a Web site that we do a lot of mail order business and we have some distributors out in Atlanta and New York, California, you know and we're on the phone with them. "Thank you; appreciate your business; tell your friends--tell somebody else," so it's--I think it's the upbringing of being in the retail grocery store that's--that's helped me develop this business and go where we're going.

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This little store, my father started inside the store; he was still a fireman working at the Fire Department at Lafayette and my mother's background--she was a cafeteria cook at the elementary school that I went to. And that was bad on my part 'cause I couldn't--couldn't get away with nothing you know. They'd go grab my mom out of the cafeteria and give me my lickins' you know. But she would run the store while he would work at the Fire Department. And a fireman works three days, three nights, off three days, so in his off three days he started making boudin. And we still have all the original equipment, the old stuffers that he used and it was a little hand-cranked stuffer that would make 15-pounds per batch. And that was some of his first batches of boudin that he produced--15 pounds at a time.

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He had quite a few people coming in the store in the afternoons and they'd come in and drink beer in the back of the store. So mostly telephone people 'cause the telephone company was real close to our store, but a mixed breed of people that would come in, and he would make these batches of boudin and he'd pass it out to these friends and--and--and I remember the man's name, and he's passed away quite a few years ago, but his name was Cliff Neveaux. He was a little short Cajun man and he told my daddy; he said you know--'cause my daddy would give them these samples and they'd try it. He said Frank; that's it. And the recipe I'm using today in 2009 is the same recipe that Mr. Cliff told my dad that's it Frank; don't change it and we've never sacrificed the quality of meat or the amount of ingredients, the amount of rice we've put. You always make alterations you know in the equipment. We're using a--a V-Max Stuffer that will stuff 6,000 pounds in about four hours you see, so you know you adapt to the new equipment but you try to keep your quality the same especially the taste of it, you know.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about your family's cultural heritage?

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RC: Yes; pure Cajun I would say--totally you know. My mother--I--I can tell you people tell me things about my mother--you either like her or you don't like her. I've never talked to anybody that ever said she didn't like her. I know I always thought I had trouble with her correcting me when I was a young kid and I couldn't quite understand how people would come to me and say oh we love her; she's so nice. Well she wasn't that nice to me. But she taught us how to work and taught us how to take care of ourselves and be clean and--and you raise your family

correctly. We still get together; we'll go and cook on Sunday afternoons. And my father is still around. He's--he has some illness, some sickness that is somewhat bringing him down and keeping him from being mobile you know. He's pretty much staying in the house but--. We've got five brothers and sisters; two girls and three boys and out of the five, four of them had their own either grocery store or restaurant. One of them, the youngest, decided to do computer repair work and that's his niche and we tried stuffing him into the store business but it just wouldn't work. He didn't like it you know.

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We--in the Lafayette area have a grocery store on the north side of town. My oldest sister has that, M&S Grocery. My middle sister, Debbie Dwyer has Dwyer's Café which her husband's father founded Dwyer's Café--downtown Lafayette--it's real popular. My oldest brother had the store on Congress Street in Lafayette and he's since got out of that business and he's working for other stores now. And then myself and my ex-wife had the store by UL in Lafayette, Comeaux's and we had the store on Kaliste Saloom Road. Back in the oil crunch, probably it was in the early '80s I mean sales was just horrible. We had a thriving business there but it was like most of our business was UL students coming in--in the oil field 'cause the oil scene in Lafayette was next to our place also. When the oil crunch hit and things started really going bad I started looking out--out of state. And I always liked to dabble in different things, so my thing back then was to buy crawfish tails and turn around and--and buy them low and sell them high. So I started shipping them out of state and naturally you know you ship crawfish tails, people would call--well you have boudin, you have andouille sausage and tasso and what have you? So we started looking at how can we take those products and ship them out of state? We found out through negative resources that you needed to be USDA approved to ship out of state. And one day I had a Federal Inspector walk into my grocery store and I had big old signs all over in there; we ship all over the

United States, the whole deal. And he walks in and he said you ship boudin? And I say yep. He says can I see your federal kitchen? And I said well sure; I mean federal didn't catch the word with me--it was my kitchen. I showed him in the back and he said no, sir; you don't understand. And he showed me his badge and he says you can't be shipping boudin out of state unless it's federally approved.

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And so you know we learned the hard way and--and that moment in time, I'm not sure if that wasn't 1986 I guess or somewhere(s) around there I started pursuing a USDA kitchen. Little did I know what it would take to do it. I found this place in Breaux Bridge and bought it from a bank. It was a--a foreclosure and met with USDA, the whole deal; this was a perfect place to be able to do our wholesale of our products out of state and they came in when we come to finalize the papers and said I'd have to add onto this place 1,000 square feet and do this and that and you know we started out with a \$250,000 budget and we had \$1,200,000 in this place before it was finished. And it took me four years to do it, but of that four years I did all the work myself, all of the remodeling, the painting, the floors, the equipment, building equipment and doing everything.

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We are probably 12 years in business at this place right here and last year we finally made a plus you know so we're feeling real good about it. We wholesale to distributors in Atlanta and one of the big items that we sell over there is the andouille sausage. Boudin--boudin is a product that's real strong in this area and as you move away from here then it starts dissipating somewhat. But what I've found is--is if I can take boudin and put it in your mouth, if I can get you to eat it I can sell it. And so we started doing demos up in New York at some of the supermarkets up there and--and I was always good about finding somebody out of state that was

interested in either reselling my product or distributing it or what have you. So I sent them up samples and all of the things we would do was all by Continental Airlines. We would pack it up in 100-pounds boxes with the--the gel ice and ship it to them and then they'd take it. And we'd encourage them to go to these stores and set up a little table and give samples.

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And I can tell you one story in New York at Balducci's they were selling our boudin and they were getting \$13 a pound for it you know and--and it blew me away 'cause I just couldn't understand why we couldn't get \$13 a pound down here and they could get it up there. But it was such a unique product that--that it worked out. Since then, I mean we have distributors around--by no means we're huge--by none; I see other companies out there and I envy and I say oh man, but you know my father taught me you keep your eyes on the road. You do your thing and don't worry about the other guy and if you keep doing it right and you're honest you'll succeed. And I--I feel like that's got a lot to do with our success.

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MBL: Besides this immediate area in Breaux Bridge, what is your strongest market in other parts of the country?

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RC: I would tell you our number one item outside of this area is andouille sausage. And that goes as far as New York, California, Atlanta, Oregon. We had a General in the middle of the Iraq War that called us and said "I want boudin and andouille and all of this from here" and sent a plane to--it's--I think it's England Air Force Base [sic: Barksdale Air Force Base] in Shreveport I

believe; we packed it up, brought it over there and--and he had it shipped to and he said "we're going to have this party right here." And I want to say it was the--the Hilton in--in Iraq, but--.

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We've--we've had--I think what brought us there was being by the College in Lafayette. You have so many different people coming in every year; every four years it was like a cleansing. You had four--you know more people coming in and it gave us the opportunity to get phone calls from people in California or in New York or wherever and say man, I went to college over there. Your mama treated us you know--so awesome and we want some boudin; can you send it? And I'd do it; with the oil crunch it was like sure. I'd put it in a box and send it and that's where I got into trouble with the USDA 'cause I said well look. This is what I'm doing. I mean I'm not hiding it.

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Well the fact of being USDA and I think what I've learned through this whole process 'cause I was scared of USDA. I was scared of the money, the inspection, the fact that they can close you down, the fact that you've got to follow this protocol and do and do and do--and I look back at it now and I say you know what? We're so much better than we were back then because they control temperatures, they control cleanliness, sanitation and--and I would tell you having been in the grocery store business for years and--and--this to me is the gospel truth. People would come in my store and say man it's so clean. We take pride in that. But there are some little retail stores that really could learn from something like that--that you know I got in here and started following the protocol at USDA and it's like man alive. You know we were taking a whole lot of risks back then; not to say we was putting out bad food or unsafe food but just sanitation and just everything; it's so much different in a USDA approved plant. And I say we're USDA and we're wholesale and we ship around the country but it's nothing for somebody to

come drive and knock on the door and come in the plant and say look; I need to buy two pounds of boudin. Now we can't sell it ready to eat 'cause we're--being it's a USDA kitchen, we can process it and sell it all packaged all day long to either retail, wholesale but we've--we've diversified. We've moved into an area where how do you get boudin spread out? It's a matter of going one day at a time.

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We're entertaining a customer this morning that's from North Louisiana that we've tried selling years ago and he came in and he says you know I just found this card and I want to talk to y'all and he's going to purchase product to resell up in North Louisiana. So it's endurance; we've endured you know all this time.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about your recipe for boudin? What makes it distinct?

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RC: Okay; I would say number one--no matter what you make is consistency and--and I'll tell you a fast little story. When I first--my father in 1980 was getting at an age and--when I say he started out making 15-pound batches, in the end of his time in the store he was doing 125,000-pounds a year through that one little store. The whole burden was on him 'cause it was him, my mother and one lady that helped him. Believe me; I do it every day. I know what kind of work that was and the equipment he had to do it, and it produced that kind of volume, but--I lost my train of thought.

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MBL: You were talking about your dad working and the equipment and the recipe?

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RC: Right; when my father came I wasn't presently actively in the grocery store. I am more build equipment, fix things, build furniture, cabinet maker by trade. He came to me and my older brother and my older brother was working for me in my cabinet shop and he said--exactly like this--*Ray, Ronnie; I'm retiring. Y'all want the store? If y'all don't want it I'm going to sell it--* pure and simple. You know it was like well sure; we want it. And I was doing well in the cabinet shop but I was struggling. I mean I was struggling day-to-day and I knew Ronnie was going to go. I mean this was an opportunity for him not to work for nobody else and to go into the business. So he took us in and he said y'all work together one year and if you and your brother don't kill each other in that year what we'll do is me and your mama is going to turn around and sell you the store.

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So he sold us the store and actually saved the money of that profits of the store that year we worked and at the end of the year divided the profits up and gave me my share, gave my brother, and then said okay; now you owe me this for your share, Ray. Ronnie you owe me--your mama for your share. So that's how he got us out of the--or got us into the grocery store.

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He [*Sighs*]*--*it was difficult that year working with my dad and them because my father-- I've had a lot of different jobs and--and when I say a lot of different jobs, I worked at Channel 10 as a cameraman. I was a Quality Control Inspector at Weatherford-Lamb; I worked as a draftsman. I've had a lot of different types of careers but all of those things taught me was how to take something and be precise with it. If--if my father was making boudin my biggest

challenge then was to find out how much he puts in each batch and you know I remember I'd have to run around and catch him 'cause it was like well daddy, how many--how much onions do you put in there? *Man that orange bowl--you know and I'd say orange bowl?* And then--and I used to teach him; I'd say well suppose that bowl breaks or you lose it then how many--how much onions? *Well then I get me another bowl but--*. I would go around and before they would actually put it in the pot I'd grab that bowl and weigh it. And I'd develop--I didn't develop the recipe; they had it but I was able to transcribe the recipe into something that was weight.

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Being a Quality Control Inspector, my thing was is well if we put 10-pounds of onions today we're going to put 10-pounds of onions tomorrow and so we took the recipe. We used pork picnic cushion meat. Well let me back up and say when he started, we used the pork picnic ham which is the front shoulder of the pig. We would go to Affiliated Foods and buy 2,000--3,000 pounds of it and him, my brother, and myself would sit at this table and debone all this meat, take the bones off. This was a chore; I mean it was work. And not to say that nicked fingers and the little you know things here and there, but we would debone all this meat. Well naturally when it came time to retire we didn't want to continue doing all this--me and my brother, deboning the meat, but we found out that you can buy meat deboned already. So we started doing some cost things and figuring out well you know what? It's cheaper if we buy deboned than it is us doing this labor. And then we can produce a whole lot faster.

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So what we had to do though when--when you buy deboned picnic meat there's two portions of that. You end up with the cushion meat or they call it picnic heart; there's different names for it but it's the center most ball of meat in that shoulder that's real lean. And then you have the outer parts of it which is just the--the regular picnic meat. That's a lot fatter; it has a lot

of fat in it. Boudin has to have fat in it, okay. Now we've done some things to control that but we would use the pork picnic meat; we'd use pork liver and take it and put our little recipe together. We'd use onions, celery, bell pepper, red pepper, black pepper, back then MSG, but we quit using MSG through time because it was just such a negative for the public and parsley and green onions. And put that recipe together; you'd boil the meat for two and a half hours. We'd get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, have all the meat cut and salted in the pot, sitting in the cooler, and then 4:00 in the morning, get there, take the pot out, put it on the burner, light it up, let it cook for two hours. At the end of two hours, take--we used a basket to be able to remove the meat to keep the broth left in the pot. We removed the meat separated from the broth and then take the meat and dump it in a grinder and grind it with the fresh green onions and the fresh parsley. And that was it in there; now the onions and bell pepper and celery was boiled with the meat.

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I hear stories and I--and I know of a bunch of people that's doing the same thing but they're grinding their onions raw and putting it in the cooked meat. In other words, when they grind their cooked meat, they add the raw onions and the bell pepper and celery and they grind it like that. I just--my experience has been with it--and it's the same way with potato salad. When my mother makes potato salad we would not eat onions if they was raw in that potato salad. But if she cooked them the flavor was there and you couldn't tell they were there, so it's--I think that's where that came from in our family, why we cook the onions with the bell pepper and the celery.

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Once the meat is ground up and--and with that mixture it's set aside, we then take the broth out of the pot. And again when my father was making it he'd dump that ground meat inside the mixer, dump his cooked rice in the mixer and then he would start using a certain pot he had,

and I would tell you we probably still have that pot somewhere(s). But he would dip in that mixture and he would dip in as such where he wouldn't get the grease that was on the top. He'd scoop it in and always stir it up to get the seasoning mixed with it. A challenge--how much broth are you putting, dad? And I'd count sometimes; sometimes it was like 12 pots; sometimes it was like 12 and a half, 13 and--and all he could tell me--. And I mean my parents are--my parents are smart people. They're hard workers; they really are but they just couldn't--it wasn't--it didn't make sense to them to say go and measure this--and use three gallons of broth or even weigh it. It was so many of these pots, but he would tell me--I'd ask him. And--and this is a true thing here; I would pray. Lord, help me see what my dad sees because I'm struggling right here to try find out why is he putting sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less?

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I can give you an answer for all of that in just a little bit--why it was happening 'cause-- and I would ask him and he would tell me, it's the moon. It's the moon. You ever dig a hole when the moon is a certain way? When you go take that dirt and put it back in the hole some days it'll just pile up; some days you won't have enough dirt. I had a hard time believing that; I mean that was just like an--an old type thing. I found out what it was but it--we eventually got to a point where I was able to measure it. And when I say *took time*, we might have made four or five batches of boudin in a week. It probably took me five or six weeks to get the recipe. It--it was almost as if it was a game. I was trying to find out the weight and they didn't want me to know. And it wasn't that; no, they were just busy working and doing--doing and they wouldn't pay attention it. And I'd say mama; you need to let me know. *Well I'm sorry; I'm busy*, you know and--and gone with it.

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Well that recipe I was able to put it into weight and--and have it down on paper and--and do things like buying the meat all cut already. We would get the meat in, cut it in smaller pieces, put it in tubs and salt it. That enabled us to be able to produce boudin on the fly. If--if--I mean we've sold up to 1,000 pounds a day. And I know there's places that sell more than that. But in this little bitty grocery store 1,000 pounds was a lot. I'd mean we'd finish making a 200-pound batch and was wore out and then you're talking about 1,000 pounds to have to start all over again. It was a job.

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Back in them days truthfully, I hated it; I hated it. I--it was like I want to go do something else. I don't like this but we were all raised in that--that environment and when he finally came and retired it was kind of like you know I like woodworking. I mean I really like building things with wood and what have you but it really wasn't that good to me financially. So I said well I'm going to try this. And I kept my cabinet shop open and let my wife run it while I would go to the store and make boudin and work during the day and then when I got off work I'd go back home and finish some of the jobs that we had started and what have you. And realizing then that the business was--I mean my father, we were like I said--no advertising; he was really expand this business.

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Just a quick little note; we were fishing one time in Toledo Bend on a weekend and I noticed a boat kept getting close to us and close to us and--but he wasn't fishing. And finally he got close to us and he said *hey; I see ya'll are from Louisiana*. And we said yeah. He says *I notice a little place over there by the college*. He says *they got the best boudin in the world, this old man and this little old lady runs that store and on and on*. And I was just so proud you know that--. What I did is I finally pulled out a card out of my wallet and gave him a card and showed

him that now it's my store you know and it--it was a trip. But what it told me was is my father had a calling from all over the place that you is how did he do it? He didn't advertise; it was all word of mouth--people carrying over to other people.

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They're still around and they still come and--and visit the plant over here and when they--they have a lot of friends from like in Canada and what have you that they met through the years in the grocery store. These people will come and stay a week with them. They bring them over to my store. They'll bring them to my sister's store. They'll bring them to my sister's restaurant and just to kind of let them know how we're doing, you know how everything is going and what have you. But they're real proud people; they--they really are.

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I went all over the world, huh?

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MBL: No; that's great. You can talk all day. Tell me a little bit about--you talked about getting the deboned ham. Tell me about your casings. What sort of casings do you use since you're a USDA plant?

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RC: Casings is something that--that was a--I want to say it was a negative with boudin, and you know but some people tend to be grossed out--or the idea of *ooh* real--real intestines. Well to clarify it; you will not find boudin with artificial casings and I can tell you the reason why. Artificial casing is not elasticity; it's not like the real casings of a pig, the intestines of a pig. It's rigid; it's firm. Boudin is a product that has rice and meat in it, so when you cool boudin off it

shrinks. When you turn around and heat it up it expands; it swells. If you don't have something that has elasticity to it like natural casing that boudin is going to come out each end; it'll pop. You could tie it I would imagine but it--it you know--then again if you tie it to where it's long enough when it's hot and it looks right, when it's cold it looks horrible. So that's the main reason that they don't use artificial casing and--and we use the original casing.

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The casing has--my God--casing is like gold right now. I mean in the store when we took it over in '80 we were paying \$3.25 a hank of casing. Now what they mean by a hank, a hank is 100 yards of--of casing. It doesn't mean it's 100 yards, one complete piece. It might be three or four pigs that they put together. What they do with casing is they take the intestines and they run it through some razor type dyes and what it does it cuts all of the excess off of that casing and it leaves just that little fine film on it. The negative of that is when they cut it if they don't do it properly you end up with little pinholes in it. A pinhole is taboo for boudin because of the contraction and the expansion. If you have a little pinhole when you're making it and it's cold and you go put it in a pot of water and heat it up, you're going to end up with a gumbo and you can't eat the boudin, all right. Tricks to get around it is heat it in the microwave or in the oven or on the barbeque pit and then it pretty much holds firm; it dries that skin and keeps it from coming out.

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We heated boudin in the grocery store 'til—shew--probably 1986 in a pot of water. I used to--and the thing with this is--is we'd put 15--20 pounds in this pot of water. You put the water to where it's boiling; you drop the boudin in and it stops boiling right. You let the water continue and then right before it comes to a boil again it'll start to steam on the surface of the water. You lower your fire to a medium fire and you let it sit maybe 10 minutes. And when you pick up a

link with a spoon and squeeze it it'll be spongy. It'll spring back all right--unlike when it's cold and you squeeze it, it stays--the impression stays in it.

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We started noticing every time we would dump that pot of water we'd have to change the water often and it was because the boudin was coming out of the ends of it. Now we learned--evolved; you leave a longer skin on the end of the casing when you do it and that when you go to heat it up it expands and when we finished with our heated product, there's a little short nub of skin on it.

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When we buy casing we buy--and--and I'm not ashamed to say but it's I'm ashamed that that's the only place we can get it is China, the--the diet that the Chinese feed their pigs produces a pig with a tough, tough casing okay. They call it North American casing--would be used for fresh sausage; it has a real good bite, a real tender bite. It'll pop real easy but if you take boudin and put it in a North American casing or a casing say from the United States around here you're going to end up with a lot of gumbo in that pot. It--it won't be an edible product, so when we buy casing we buy it and we look for the toughest thing. I mean we want the bicycle chew; we want the tough casing. And \$3.25 a pound--today I'm paying \$25 a hank--\$3.25 a hank to \$25 a hank; that's how much it's increased and just gone crazy. It's affected the cost of the boudin but in a minute way. I mean 100 pounds of boudin takes 100 yards of casing--one hank. So if you're talking \$3.00 might have been what--3-cents a pound. Now it's 20-cents a pound but you know prices have increased to where it's--it's not a detriment to us that the casing is so high.

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We've went through the learning of green onions, fresh green onions and fresh parsley. Only when I got into this USDA kitchen did I find out that green onions, the fresh product and

especially the green onions has the little tube, the--you know where they cut the tops and we would put it in it--it had a lot of bacteria in it right. Now don't get scared when I say bacteria in a negative way--meaning it affects the shelf life of that product; it affects how long the product can sit in your refrigerator without getting bad. When boudin--boudin is normally good for seven days in the refrigerator okay; you can get it fresh and put it in your refrigerator cold and hold it seven days. If you cook it and heat it up and then save the leftovers in the refrigerator you can probably keep it two weeks because you've killed all that bacteria on the skin and what have you. The--the culprit or the negative is the raw skin that has the ability to have bacteria in it. Casing comes packed in salt; salt doesn't kill bacteria but it--it tries to keep it from reproducing. It slows it down.

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We started doing some testing in here and that's one of the things USDA does; they--USDA does, they pull samples of our product and run it to a lab, ship it to a lab and have it tested. They'll give you the bacteria count on it; they'll give you the shelf life on it and tell you how long you can hold it. We found out that green onions and parsley had that--the bad bacteria in it--not bad, but the one that was making it not last as long. The casing was another thing that had that in it, so we've been able to understand why and what is it--we use a dehydrated green onion now that has been--they run it through like a cobalt machine that kills whatever bacteria. When you wet this dehydrated green onion it is back to fresh again; it looks just like normal green onion, so you do that to be able to increase your shelf life. We feel like it didn't cut or hurt the quality of our product or change the flavor of the taste, but it's some things you've got to do--change here and there to try to--well you try to do it to be in the marketplace, but number one you know the longer you can keep your product on the shelf, the--the better off you are.

00:32:16

Onions, yellow onions--we've always used yellow onions and it's always been 10 pounds to a batch you know and pork liver. We--we get--we buy pork liver and my father always bought it the same way; it comes 30 pounds to a case, 30 pounds of pork liver to a batch of boudin. It--it's ironic or funny 'cause some customers will come in and man, your boudin--you missed it this week. What do you mean? Oh it's--it's got a lot of--you're putting too much liver. And--and we would chuckle about it all the time 'cause it was like what--it's a 30-pound box. You know what I mean; you put one box of liver in it and that's it. How can you put more liver but what we've come to understand is when they slaughter pigs sometimes they slaughter old sows--old sows, young pigs; some liver is a little stronger than others. You know to compensate it I don't know that--I mean we've done things like when you buy a red pepper we do a taste test. We buy a 60,000 cayenne red pepper, but I can tell you some days--or sometimes I get 60,000 cayenne red pepper that's more like 35, so--.

00:33:23

MBL: Now is 60 and 35 a heat rating?

00:33:26

RC: Heat--heat power; it's all rated on a scale where they--they--I don't know how they do it--if it's chemically done or if there's actually people tasting it and rating it. It's not real precise. What you buy in the grocery store when you go buy red pepper is about 35,000--25,000 heat power. We've just found if we use a 60,000 heat power we have to put less in it. It's--it's minute pennies more so you end up with a savings on it. But what we do--we buy our seasoning now in 500-pound batches okay, so we'll take--. And we premix our seasoning in-house, the--the red pepper, the black pepper, the salt. We put it all in the mixer, blend it all up, and then I have the

ladies portion it. It might be 2.5, 2.6, 2.7 pounds per batch. They'll put it in little bags. When we're ready to make a batch of pork boudin they go grab that one bag; that one bag is for one batch. It does two things for us; one it's quality controlled keeping the seasoning the same. The other thing is--is I don't have to worry about an employee taking my recipe and going to peddle it to somebody else down the road. It's we have one key person that does this mixing of the seasoning. But what we really do is when we get new red pepper in we'll use it like normal, make one batch with that amount of red pepper in it and we'll taste the boudin. I mean they love it 'cause they're--they're eating boudin at work, but they'll taste it and eat it and we'll gather opinions and say well let's up it to this. The recipe programs we're using now is all per hundred of a pound; it's all in decimals. My recipe program if I told it I wanted to come out with 153 pounds of boudin or if I wanted to come out with 1,250 pounds of boudin it's going to tell me the exact ingredients of each thing to put in it.

00:35:12

Every time we produce we print a recipe--every time, so that recipe stays with it and then we can always go back and look at it and say well we need to adjust the red pepper. One of the things we don't adjust and we don't change is the quantity, quality of rice, meat, and--and the liver that's in it. Those things--that's--and the onions, bell--in other words, we--we float on I guess is what I'm trying to tell you is the pepper, the red pepper. That's the key thing that to me if somebody wants to say your boudin wasn't consistent it'd be that. Rice--we--the same--my mother and father would cook rice in the big Magnalite pots, if you remember them big aluminum oblong pots. Those pots were heavy. You know you fill up one with cooked rice and--and the lady that was helping my mother and them whose name was Miss Dot--Dot David she worked for them and retired and then turn around and came and worked for me and worked for

me 20 years and retired. And she just couldn't pick up them pots anymore, so we started looking at the commercial rice cookers and--and different ways to cook rice.

00:36:14

I will tell you straight out; our pet peeve with boudin is--is the whole grain rice. I don't like mushy rice; I will not eat mushy rice. If somebody was--and I sound picky but mushy rice, rice pudding, not for me; one of the things that I think made our boudin consistent over the years is we know how to cook rice. I don't know if you know this but you don't have to put all the rice--all the water in your rice to cook rice. We've experimented to the point where we've started cooking rice with less water. Each time, just a little less water; you can't tell the difference but sooner or later you get to the point where you understand that--that rice needed this amount of water to cook and to be firm but not hard and that's all the water you need. So when you mix that cooked rice with the boudin and the broth we measure our broth; we know how much cooked meat we end up with; we know how much cooked rice we end up with and when we pull it--that batch is--is not going to be dry. It's not going to be mushy. You know it's always going to be consistent and firm.

00:37:18

I've given you tricks and little secrets and things that we do here and there and it was only from learning you know through years of just doing it. I'm a perfectionist; I like to pick things apart. I want to know why and sometimes they couldn't tell me but through the years now I've come to understand like the--when my dad would do the boudin I was telling you about the--the moon. I'd say well today you came out with a batch that's like 225 pounds. And we did one tomorrow and it's going to be 210. I just couldn't fathom it; I don't understand how this thing can float the way it is. Well what it was is he was using pots you know to measure like a level pot. It don't take very much you know--a little crown in that pot or a bowl of chopped onions, you know

maybe one or two extra in it, and the broth part of it that he was putting in it that wasn't precise. It wasn't--now it was always good. Now I got to tell you; but I don't think it was as precise as it was today as far as the mixture goes. If we're off today it's because we made a mistake. There's something we might have did wrong. But if the recipe is followed it's going to be consistent over and over and over again. That's where I come to the conclusion when he finished making a batch of boudin, today he had 225; he had 210--tomorrow it was that little fluctuation in the weights.

00:38:46

One of the other strong things was he would take it, put it in a pot, put in on a burner, a gas burner and light it right like a crawfish boiling pot. Well if you had the fire up a little high you know it wasn't a regulated heatt--not like the kettles we use now. We have the big stainless steel 100-gallon kettles and when we turn it on we tell them we want it to cook at 325 and we have a timer for an hour and 45 minutes. I can almost assure you that when we sample the net weight of meat that we have in that pot it's within one to two pounds every time when we finish cooking because we're cooking it at a controlled temperature. We're cooking it for a controlled amount of time; you know the end result is going to be a controlled batch. My batches are 212 pounds per batch and I mean it's so close from time to time, but you know it works out that way.

00:39:32

MBL: How many batches do ya'll do a day and--and what is your distribution like in terms of quantity?

00:39:39

RC: Because of the USDA--now in the grocery store when we were back by the college over there we were--we would do six batches every other day which was 1,200 pounds--1,500 pounds

every other day. I was proud of that amount. I talked to people that had other stores around and-- and I don't know; you know I mean it was almost like you almost felt like they was lying 'cause I know what it takes to make that kind of stuff and--. But they would say like oh we made 5,000 pounds a day and I was like yeah, right. But you know everybody has got an ego and everybody has got something that they would want to brag about or push or whatever. I just like to be solemn and say you know this is what we do; it's not nothing to be ashamed of. In that little store, 125,000 pounds was a lot of boudin for them to produce a year.

00:40:19

In the plant over here right now because we're USDA approved and because we can't cross-mix species, meaning we make crawfish boudin, so today if we're doing crawfish boudin we can't do pork boudin, so we have to separate and do. And because of the distribution we're-- we're doing probably five batches of boudin per production run which would be a day in here per product. In other words it's not to say we can't do pork original, pork mild, and pork extra hot all in one day and do 15 batches. But that's more than what we can handle--production. The USDA mandates you work an eight-hour day. If this Inspector is here and works past 2:30--in other words, if our production runs late and we start working past 2:30 we have to pay overtime to the US government, okay. As long as we operate from 6:00 in the morning 'til 2:30 in the afternoon there's no overtime. But any time we go beyond that we have to pay him overtime. I don't like paying overtime; you know **[Laughs]** I just--it's kind of like it eats into your profit. And so that's--I truly haven't looked at the numbers. I will tell you this; last year was our best year ever--ever in the history of Comeaux's as far as the volume of product we produced. I truly have to tell you our number one product as far as volume is andouille sausage--the smoked andouille sausage. The second one is the pork boudin and then we go into things like crawfish boudin, seafood, alligator; we do boneless crawfish stuffed chickens, we do crawfish pies, we

produce the Harold's Dressing Mix for--actually my son-in-law bought the company and we were the manufacturer of Harold's Dressing Mix. We do a private label; the name on the cup is Harold's; but Comeaux is producing it and the only thing that on that cup that identifies us is our USDA logo. So we produce that doing private labeling.

00:42:16

We have quite a few companies around the country that we private label for; we'll make our original pork boudin recipe but we'll put their name on it. The only thing on that pack that has anything to do with me period is my USDA bug that identifies me. And since 09/11 you can't find out who's who anymore. It used to be you could get on the internet and type in the USDA bug and find out who--who that plant was. Well since 09/11 they shut all of that down and it's for security and--and what have you, you know; so that's not available anymore but--.

00:42:50

MBL: You mentioned your son-in-law; can you tell me a little bit about your family and whether or not you think they will continue this family business?

00:42:57

RC: Well yeah; and that's not--it's not disappointing. It's surprising to me more than anything. I've got--I was married--when I was in the grocery store by UL I was married to my ex-wife. We had three kids--25, right now 25, 24, and 22 year-old. They were all raised in the grocery store; I mean all of them. I remember the little spiders that the kids crawled around on; we--we would go in there and I mean we--we lived up above the store. So where's Michelle? We'd be looking for Michelle? We'd go see she was in the little spider on the other side of the rack sucking on a link of boudin you know. They were all raised in the store and we--I just--man I was hard-headed

about it. I thought these kids is going to take on you know like I did with my dad even though I didn't want. I've tried them all in the business. The only one that comes close is my oldest daughter. She--she went to UL for Food Management and all of this and she's probably the only one that would really grab hold of it and take it and go. There's no doubt in my mind she could come in here today and run this plant. I mean she--she knows all the equipment and knows all the processes, the HACCP of the USDA; she learned all of that in college.

00:44:16

And my middle girl is a beautician and you know you--it's like me when I was doing woodworking. I had--I just--my father wanted me to be in there and I hated it. And so you kind of let them go and she is--she's got the character and qualities that I think my family would put out. She's an awesome beautician. People love her; we hear things of how good she is and I mean she's told me things like *Dad, I'm going to make it big. I'm going to make it big*. And she's tied up with Paul Mitchell and she's a Paul Mitchell educator and she's just go, go, go, go.

00:44:48

The youngest son, Matthew, he just went to school and he was working over here for me in the plant and hated it. You know it was a constant fight to get him to come to work on time, do the work; it--it would have been almost easier to hire a total stranger and fire them when they don't do the work and you couldn't do that with your kids you know. And so he--and he's a hunter; he loves to hunt. And what I did is I turned over my deer processing where we processed wild game to him and *this is your business, son*. He--he didn't do very well with it; he just--he just couldn't hang with it. He didn't like it; he--it was like a drag to come to work, so you let them go. You say well--. My ex-wife would tell me things like Ray; why do you--like I wanted another grocery store. And we'd start up another grocery store and get it running and then started up the USDA plant. And she'd say *why--like why?* And I'd say for the kids, for the kids and--and

she floored me. I mean she told me; she said, "You know they probably won't want it." And I'm telling you it floored me. I just couldn't comprehend it. It took me a long time to let it go.

00:45:53

And you know like Matthew is going to school; he's in Colorado right now. He graduates this March coming up to be a gunsmith. I can't wait 'til he comes back. And it really won't have anything to do with boudin, anything to do with what I'm doing; but to the contrary, when--when I met my new wife, Kelly and I met her through my son Matthew, the gunsmith, and her son-in-law, Matt and him were buddies. His name is Jordan Tipideaux and they were buddies. And they said, "Man, you need to meet Miss Kelly." When I was going through this divorce and all of this stuff was over with and I met her and we got together and got married, Jordan has an interest in this place--big time. I mean it's like--the minute I say anything about retiring or whatever, oh he'll do it; he wants it bad and that makes me proud you know so--. Sometimes you just can't judge the way life is going to give things to you; you've just to roll with the punches and go with it.

00:46:43

Now his wife, Kelly's daughter, which is my son's best friend also, she's in here working with us doing sales and they're doing marketing. And I would attribute a lot of our growth to that. My expertise in this business is producing that product, keeping the plant running. When it comes to book works I mean I'm good on the computer and I do all of that but I hate it--I hate it. I didn't like the retail grocery store. I loved meeting people and talking to them but I didn't like the boring thing of being there all day when business is slow and you know this plant, we produce. When we're finished producing at 2:30 or whatever time it is we go home. You don't do that in a grocery store. You're there 'til the time that store closes. So it's a different environment; it's more peaceful. I don't have people come and face-to-face confrontations in the store and you

know. I mean you have a store 25 years and believe me I've seen some things come in and--in and out of that store and been threatened sometimes and this and that, so I just feel like this is where God wants me to be because I'm producing the product. I'm keeping the quality of Comeaux's out there and I'm trying to do it in a way that other stores can sell it and it's finally working, you know.

00:47:52

MBL: Are you in any other southern regional grocery store chains that you can mention?

00:47:57

RC: We are in HEB; we are in Wal-Marts which we span as far as Breaux Bridge to Jennings. I think that's about the farthest we go--Jennings, Abbeville, Opelousas, Crowley, Lafayette, about 14 stores. We're in the Albertson Stores which is about 14 of them or less; I think they might have closed some in Baton Rouge. We do very little mom and pop stores--very little and--and I'll just tell you the reasoning behind it on our end.

00:48:27

Fuel got up to almost \$5.00 a gallon. You take that big truck and you load it up and you put them on the road and tell them to go hit all these little bitty grocery stores. There's a whole lot of miles between one store to the next. You hardly can't make any money and I'm not saying there's money to be made in it, but we haven't been able to develop that to a point where we feel comfortable sending out a guy with a truck and running all these little bitty stores. We hit the Wal-Mart(s), the Albertson's; there's you know I mean there's a lot of people coming in them stores and we'll do demos in Albertson's and the Wal-Mart(s). We have a demo lady that goes to set up a little table and she gives samples out and what have you to promote sales. And we do

some radio and--not any television advertising but radio and newspaper media type advertising. We're mostly in this area--Albertson's, Wal-Mart(s); we're talking to this gentleman right here that's from Alexandria that's a big distributor up there, and then our out of state, Inland Seafood in Atlanta is a--probably my biggest customer that we do business with up there. We have International Gourmet in Virginia; some distributors on [Inaudible] in Colorado.

00:49:42

MBL: We can interrupt so you can handle this question.

00:49:45

[End Ray Comeaux-1] An employee walked into the office and was motioning for paperwork related to the USDA record keeping. We stopped the recorder so Ray could give her the clipboard she needed, and then recording resumed using a separate track on the recorder. The following portion of the transcript refers to the time stamps on the second audio file.

[Begin Ray Comeaux-2]

00:00:00

Mary Beth Lasseter: All right; we're back and we're on track two, so the recorder is working. We were talking about the boudin and how you make it. I was going to ask you how you like to eat your boudin and what do you recommend people serving boudin with?

00:00:17

Ray Comeaux: Well I'm going to tell you what I like personally, but then I'll tell you what I hear and--and from people and what have you. In the grocery store, we would probably go through 100 to 150 pounds of boudin by 8 o'clock that morning, so a lot of people eat it for breakfast. That's my thing. First off, I like boudin heated in water. It's a trick though; if you boil the water too long, if you leave it in there boiling it'll pop and you eat up with gumbo. You can't eat. So you got to know how to heat it up that way. Over here at the plant, we don't have a method to be able to heat boudin in boiling water. We--we have a stove but it's just--it--it--we're too fast, we're too running, so I'll heat it in the microwave. My craving is a link of boudin heated in water with an A&W Root Beer. That's--I'm simple as that.

00:01:07

Now I'll tell you some favorites; I like taking the boudin and cutting it out of the skin and putting on a bread with mayonnaise--and mayonnaise and bread--period. I've heard all kinds of stories I mean from Cane Syrup to bananas to cracklings mixed in it you know. When we would--we made cracklings big time in that store for years like 15 years made cracklings. Well when you scoop up all the cracklings and the sellable cracklings is the big chunks--you'd always end up--we'd call it the *grimmes* that's the little crumbs that's all in the bottom. When you take those *grimmes* and mix it with your boudin and eat it that a way, it gives it like a bacon taste you know.

00:01:51

Another favorite way for me is putting it on a barbeque pit grill you know. You put a piece of foil down on your grill and just take the boudin out of the package and put it on that grill and just you don't want a high fire. You're not trying to burn it or anything. All you do--when you heat up boudin, the only thing you're doing is cooking the skin on the outside which is real

thin--it doesn't take nothing to cook it, and you're bringing the rice back to a cooked stage. You take rice; put it in the refrigerator overnight it gets hard like little rocks. That wouldn't be good to eat that a way. You heat it up until the point where that rice is spongy again and that's the only thing you're doing when you heat up boudin. So whether you heat it on a barbeque pit or you heat it in the pot of boiling water or you heat it in the microwave or a little toaster, all of those give you a different taste but it's the same thing. It's a cooked--we say an easy way to eat rice and gravy you know. You can eat it on the run.

00:02:47

My mother started in the store and--and we were raised poor in that store; I can tell you. Dad was a Fireman; she was a cafeteria cook but when they first took over the store, I--truthfully I bet the sales wasn't \$100 a day. You know and we had five kids and all of this. Well she would take the little boudin mix that was left once daddy would finish stuffing it; there was a little handful that was made. Well she would make the little boudin balls and--and I see them now and one of our customers we're talking to, boudin balls right now is a big thing around this area.

00:03:16

It--it blew me away because it was like my mama invented that. I don't have no proof to that effect but I don't know who was doing boudin balls back in the '70s--they were you know. She was--she was famous for taking a boudin--the mix and making a hamburger patty with it, just form it into a hamburger patty and pass it through a little egg batter and Italian bread crumbs and then take it and refrigerate it and what it'll do, it'll get to be just like a hamburger patty and then you take it and put in a skillet, like maybe a little Pam or a little butter and just brown it, and then serve it on a sandwich. You have eaten anything until you've eaten something like that.

00:03:52

One other favorite and this--she was real popular for this; this was hers. This is my mother's and I don't think anybody could take that away from her. In the college area kids would come in and I know it was a college student that asked her one day--'cause she would take smoked sausage and boil it and take that water, put onions in it and what have you and then turn around and some put Kraft plain barbeque sauce in it and make a sauce for this sausage. And so she had sausage burgers and she had--I think that was the only thing; sausage burgers with the barbeque sauce. Well one day this college student came in and said *Mrs. Comeaux; I want some boudin on that thing*. So she took a Po' Boy bread and she put the barbeque sauce on it, took a link of boudin, cut it out of the skin and spread it on there, took three slices of this sausage and put it on there and then put some more barbeque sauce on it. It was a man-handler; I mean it was something--when you finished eating this you knew you had a meal. That was the big thing in that grocery store around the UL students. And I bet if--I don't know how far out this thing goes but I'd love to see how many people out there ate a boudin Po' Boy at Comeaux's Grocery back when they were in college at UL and I think it would surprise people how many she sold of them things. It's--you probably couldn't find a store today that does it. I mean I don't know of any anywhere(s) and so if I ever want the nostalgia--go back in time--I'll do that. I'll take like a link and put me the barbeque sauce and put it altogether like that. It's a real good way to eat it. It's a different taste.

00:05:20

Just like fried boudin balls that you see; that's a different--the same meat but when you fry it, it makes that little gummy crust on the outside so when you--you have something to chew. I believe this; even with the boudin or the boudin balls; when you put it in your mouth you have to have some kind of texture, some kind of chew. If your rice was mushy and the meat was overcooked you know then you have no texture; you have no chew. You need to have a chew.

00:05:48

MBL: Now some people recommend that you eat the casings and some people recommend that you split it and just eat the stuffing. How do you feel about eating the casings on the boudin?

00:05:59

RC: There--the casing is processed the same way I process my products in this USDA plant. Eating casing doesn't scare me the least bit. Now I'm going to tell you a little secret. When we was kids running around that grocery store and my parents was in there working, we would go in the cooler and get us a little piece of casing and tie a knot on it, wet it, and fill it up with sugar. I'm serious; it sounds corny but we would do that and then tie the knot on the other end and suck on it--kind of chew on it, and the--the casing has little pores so the sugar would kind of bleed out. It was sweet, but it wasn't like eating a spoon of sugar. It was eating like--like a candy. Eating casing doesn't bother me all and--and you know when you say people recommend you eat the casing and some don't, I think it's a matter of--sometimes I eat it and sometimes I don't. It's just a matter of how I feel you know. If--I told you that we use tough casing, so if I bite into--I ate a link yesterday to be truthful with you. The casing is real tender; I ate it all. But there's some days I'll go and it's rubber. I mean it's like who wants to eat a piece of rubber, so you know it--it's a matter of preference.

00:07:03

As far as the--the part of it being *gross* and I use that word loosely but it's a clean processed product that's refrigerated and kept USDA and what have you and the fact that it comes from the intestine of the pig is not something that bothers me. I know it bothers some people and I'm going to tell you I really believe that's how the boudin ball and all of this other

stuff came to life. It was an alternate way of eating boudin without having to deal with the casing.

00:07:30

When I told you earlier that we were doing a lot of shipping out of--out of the--into the United States; when I would deal with somebody from New York they'd ask me that--I mean right off. Well is it real casing or--? And I'd say yes, ma'am; it's real casing. Oh I don't want it; you know they were scared of the skin and--and you almost have to educate the public and kind of let them know. You're taking it and you're putting it into 212-degree water. You're killing anything that might be on it that would be bad. So if you like the texture of it I'd say eat it; go for it. If you don't, spit it out; that's where the boudin stickers came up--*beware, driver eating boudin*. See they'll spit the casing out and you might get it on your windshield. **[Laughs]**

00:08:11

MBL: I've not ever heard of that; that's great. **[Laughs]** Can you tell me a little bit about how you build your schedule for this plant, because I know you make a lot of product? What's a typical day like for an employee?

00:08:24

RC: First off in this plant, every day we do pre-op. And pre-op means to us an employee, a designated employee will take a log and they'll walk through every room in the plant and look at every piece of equipment, every machine we used the previous day and insure that there's no little pieces of meat. And--and seriously one-sixteenth of a speck of meat found in the mixer the USDA will call that an NR. It's a non-compliance. NR is like getting an F on a test, all right; once you get the F you've got to go explain to your parents or something. Well with an NR with

us we've got to write reports, forms saying why it happened, how we're going to prevent it from happening again and what kind of process do we have in place for that never to happen again. Once you have an NR and you write an NR or get a written--an NR on you, you can't use the same answer. If we got an NR today on this same thing, tomorrow we can't use that same answer. This whole process is called HACCP and HACCP enables a plant like mine to control problems before they happen, before you get people sick. We analyze, we have about 50 different HACCP plans--sorry, 50 different HACCP plans. **[Ray goes into the file cabinet and pulls a folder with HACCP plans to show during the interview.]** Each product we produce is a plan and what a plan is--it's a roadmap. All the changes we made to this plan, the legal names for it, the products we produce under that name, the--where it's going to be distributed at, how it's used, how you heat it up, a process of producing the product from the moment you're receiving the meat, the ingredients to the thawing of it, to the cutting, to the cooking, to seasoning, the packaging, and final shipping you have a floor plan of every process you got to do. Once you have that floor plan then you go to what they call Hazard Analysis and you start looking at this saying okay; if I'm going to get somebody sick or I'm going to mess up this product where's the critical things at? One of the critical deals would be cooking--not bringing it up to the proper temperature to--to get rid of the bacteria or maybe putting it in the cooler and not refrigerating and not cooking it down properly. So you start identifying these problem areas and right here they're marked in yellow, the--the two problem areas we would have producing this particular product. Once we do the Hazard Analysis we answer different questions; reasonably like to occur--yes; and in the basis--why; and then what are we going to do about it? So we start answering all of these questions. And when we have a hazard like here we put into effect a log, so we say when we identify a hazard on this particular product this is how we

control it. So as long as we maintain the process of this product and stay within those guidelines of this we're good and we're--we're good to ship.

00:11:16

Employees, the HACCP plan of this thing is myself and a key employee. The employees in the back they'll do a pre-op in the morning and then there's a designated person that does it. She'll do a pre-op; once she clears the plant--in other words, once she goes through everything and sees it--which takes about 15--20 minutes 'cause you--after you do it a while you know where to look you know and you can identify certain spots here and there so when they're washing they pay closer attention to that particular spot--they'll start out in the morning. Most of the time the meat is coming in 'cause we--we'll buy like what they call combos. The meat comes in 2,000 pound boxes; it's a pallet with a cardboard box. It's got a bag lined in it and it's not just individual boxes of meat; it's full. They'll take that and--and depending what we're making, if it's fresh sausage we'll get their logs printed up, their recipe printed up and then they'll go in the back and they'll say okay well this batch--. And you see the recipe tells them exactly what to put in it. So we had 200 pounds of pork picnic, 200 pounds of pork cushion meat, and then start jalapeno and all the seasoning and whatever--they'll gather up all of that. One individual in there puts this seasoning part together. It's not the whole plant; it's always this person. They'll take it and start grinding the meat. We have five people working in the plant which doesn't sound like much. What we've did in the last year is spent a chunk of money on equipment. And by doing that we've been able to process three times the volume we would process previous with the same three people. That's a savings.

00:12:59

They'll--some people in the back specialize--like two of the ladies is--their specialty is seasoning and putting the seasoning together and packaging. That--that's what they do; that's

what they like to do so it's--everybody is cross-trained but if that's their preference I'd rather them do what they're doing and be happy than to be forcing them to do something different. We have some that just cook. Cooking is--you think cooking would be just taking the seasoning and all that and putting it in the pot and cooking. But it's not; I mean when you're dealing with--we make crawfish pies. One of the things with crawfish pies you can tell them this much red pepper, this much black pepper, this much onion, this much celery but when you get to cornstarch, the pie has to be a certain thickness so that when you go eat it, it doesn't run all over the place. You know so she's got to be able to see. You can tell her, put this much cornstarch and this much water, but sometimes it's not enough so you she's got to add a little more. So it's a unique thing that--that person that's cooking has to realize, kind of like I was saying I prayed to my dad--well I prayed to the Lord; show me what he sees. That's what I hope for them maybe that they can see that.

00:14:03

Some of them clean. I have one guy back there that does just maintenance. Anything broken they come to him. If--if they're doing something and it breaks he takes care of it, you know so it's--it's a good place to work. It really is.

00:14:18

For the first 10 or 12 years in here we really couldn't pay employees much. I mean when I tell you we had a budget of \$250,000 and spent a \$1.2 million? I can't tell you how many days I thought we was going to go under. I look at that like the devil chasing me or a dog chasing me--snapping at my behind. I had to keep running to keep him from catching me. That's how this whole history has been in here. It was like we were so close to bankruptcy, so close to not being able to pay the bills. I mean it's--it's horrible when you've got to tell people--and they call you for the money and you say I'm--I can't pay your right now; I'm--you know what I'm saying.

There's been a whole lot of history of that. We're not there yet; we're not even close to being there yet but we're way better today than what we were then.

00:15:02

They--we--we do a lot with just a small amount of people but most of it is in the equipment. I would tell you packaging is one area that we--we spent \$100,000 on a packaging machine and it's two people stationed. We have two ladies that load it. The machine forms and makes the pouches. The ladies are just dropping the product in it and as fast as they can put it in it is going through the machine, vacuuming it, putting the label on it, sealing it, coming out the other end finished. Back then 600 pounds would take all day to pack; today we can do 6,000 pounds in one day. Now that's not to say we're doing 6,000 pounds of day of product but the point is--is we--we can expand now without hurting the quality of our product. We can keep it the way it is.

00:15:52

I think a big part of the day to answer your question for the people in the back, we might cook four or five hours a day; we clean two of those you know--there's at least two hours of cleaning every day. And when I say clean I'm talking about sanitize the walls, the ceilings, all the equipment, you know. It's--it's not--if you don't like to clean this is not the kind of job for you, not in the USDA plant. Now I say it's different in the other places but this is a clean, clean, clean--.

00:16:21

MBL: Do a lot of your employees stay long-term or is there a lot of turnover in it?

00:16:25

RC: I was telling you I had Miss Dot that worked for me 20 years that we did a retirement for her. I don't hire somebody if I don't plan on keeping them. I mean my--you know it's different; you get people that just don't click or they don't work or attitudes or whatever; truthfully the worst part of this job is the employees or was the employees. Everybody I have back here, I think the youngest person or the newest person I have has been here almost a year. The oldest has been here about eight--nine years, or actually when we first started producing--I've had this place 12 years but four years we weren't operating. We were repairing and building the plant. I can tell you whenever there is an argument or something back there 'cause it's all ladies in the back and they argue [*Laughs*] you know. When there's an argument I'm constantly telling somebody, we love you; we don't want you to leave. You know we need you. This is a good job. Go home; chill--something you know but like you've--you've got to--I'm not saying ladies are hard to work. They're different to work than men and I mean the way I see it. Now my wife tells me that I've got a knack for it. I can go talk to them and kind of resolve it and everything is good, but I think just the sure fact that I'm the boss, it's my company, you know if I say this they stop. But they--yeah long-term; I mean I--I don't have no plans on getting rid of anybody back there. I like them all and--and they're all different. They're all from young to old; they're all different.

00:17:55

MBL: Now did you--where did you grow up--what city, was it in Lafayette?

00:17:58

RC: Lafayette, yeah Lafayette, Louisiana a block from North Side High School and I'll tell you this. When I would go to school in the morning there was two things you could smell in that neighborhood. They had a community coffee--I'm sorry Mellow Joy Coffee Plant. It was the

same as my dad and them; you know a little family owned business. Mellow Joy Coffee is pretty--pretty strong around here right now. You could smell Mellow Joy Coffee roasting and that was probably a mile or so from the high school I went to and my dad cooking boudin and when he started he started in the garage behind the house that he turned into a kitchen. That's how we started, so we would walk to school. School was only two blocks away; we'd walk to school and we'd smell Mellow Joy Coffee roasting and boudin cooking. And it's a real--my neighbors around here during the day I'll walk outside and my neighbor is man; what are ya'll cooking today? God, you know [*Laughs*] so it's--it's--it's a memory you know that sticks back.

00:18:55

MBL: So how did you get from Lafayette to Breaux Bridge? Was it simply the property availability or other reasons to move?

00:19:01

RC: Okay; you know we--we had--when I was pursuing the thing for a USDA plant and my goal was just to ship it out of state. We were doing a good healthy out of State business when we were doing the retail grocery store and I found out I needed this USDA kitchen after getting caught. I found some plants around that was producing that was struggling and I went to them and I approached them about doing some private labeling for me. Would you make my boudin for me if I gave you the recipe--you have to follow my recipe, but--and then put my name on it? And I made some agreements with people where they said yes they would do it. We lasted probably 10 years maybe doing that with other people, but I didn't have a control on the quality--the consistency. Now I'm telling you; I can give you a recipe to three different people and three

different people is going to cook it the same way even though all the ingredients are the same.

It's a matter of having that control.

00:19:54

I had this--just this crawl in me that I wanted to do my own thing. We found a building in Lafayette we bought and it was 5,000 square foot building and I was going to build my kitchen in there. The property had three acres of land on it. I built me a nice house on it and raised my kids there and it took four years for me to draw the plans and have it all approved with USDA to put that kitchen in that building in Lafayette. And we started getting second thoughts about it you know. It was like man we build this next to our house; we had a real nice house on this property. We can't expand the building anymore than what it was 'cause the building had some restrictions and codes to it and--and the amount of money they wanted, \$450,000 to remodel that building. Well we just put it on hold; we didn't do anything. We said we'll just wait. And I don't know; I was talking to a guy one day that sells tamales in Houma, and he told me about this building here. And he says you know the bank picked up that building up and all. I bet it would be a nice place for you. So I called the bank and got a key and came and looked at it and they wanted \$250,000--no, they--\$200,000 is what they wanted for this. And I mean I looked--and all the equipment was in here. I mean it was a working plant. It looks like when they locked the door and shut it down like that they had desk drawers with stacks of checks left in it that they never cashed. I--it blew me away. It was--but it was people who were running a company for somebody who owned it that was never here, you know. So they--when they got married and closed the door, they walked away; that was it.

00:21:24

Well I made an agreement with the bank and bought the place and felt like I was way ahead of the game 'cause I had a building already USDA approved with all the equipment in it

for \$200,000. I borrowed \$250,000 to put in extra cosmetics, clean up and do whatever. One of my natures is I am a perfectionist. I--I can't do something halfway; I'm--it kills me. It's just something in me that I'll--I'll tear it all apart and start all over again. Well my--where I could have left the carpet in here, I pulled it all up and put ceramic tile. I could have left the walls; I painted all the walls. We remodeled this place from front to back--gutted it totally and went through everything, all the tile in the back. We've got 4,000 square foot of plant here and it's all quarry tiled--six by six quarry tile. The USDA loves it. We don't have problems with USDA. The USDA comes in here and they say Ray, we need this done. Yes, sir; and it will be done that day. I don't have no problems with them. It's better to go with USDA than it is to fight USDA.

00:22:33

MBL: Do USDA Inspectors come by on surprise inspections or do you have someone at the plant during all your operating hours? How does that work?

00:22:40

RC: Every day, every day; my plant is USDA approved. It's state approved. And what that allows me is, is USDA is meat and poultry products. The State is seafood, like crawfish boudin, seafood and alligator boudin. The state comes in and inspects once a year and they'll be coming real soon to inspect 'cause it's right around the first of the year they come in. The USDA has an office in this facility and they're here every day. I'm not saying the Inspector is here every day but every day he might come in for an hour; he might come in and spend the whole day. It just depends on what's going on, what kind of problems we have--if we have problems or not. We don't hear nothing from the USDA; I mean they come in and they check all the paper and make sure we're doing everything right and--and they go about their business. This particular Inspector

has five patrols that he manages--five different USDA plants in this area. And I'd like to think we're one of the best ones, but you know. **[Laughs]**

00:23:43

MBL: Well my machine looks like it's getting--the memory is full, so I'm going to ask you is there anything else that I haven't asked or that you want to share about the family business or--or what boudin means to this area?

00:23:54

RC: I'm going to tell you; I--I--as long as I was a kid and as young as I can remember boudin was a real strong influence in our life. Sometimes other things like cracklings or you know people talk about chaudin or they talk about blood boudin--things like that—it's dying off. You know I would truthfully, I mean boudin is a great thing and it makes me a good living. I would wish French--French-speaking because French is something that is--I learned how to speak French from my aunts and my uncles and what have you. Now I'm not a fluent French speaker 'cause I don't speak it enough but I love talking French. And we would tell people--and I would want to end this like this *Viens manger du bon manger Cajun* and what that is--is come eat some good Cajun food.

00:24:44

MBL: That's perfect. Thank you so much for your time today; I appreciate it Mr. Comeaux.

00:24:47

RC: Awesome.

Interview of: Ray Comeaux
Interviewer: Mary Beth Lasseter
Interview Date: January 22, 2009

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00:24:47

[End Ray Comeaux-2]