



**Nancie McDermott
Chapel Hill, North Carolina**

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Location: Nancie McDermott's Residence, Chapel Hill, NC
Interviewer: Rien Fertel
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 2 hours, 30 minutes
Project: Women Cookbook Writers

[Begin Nancie McDermott Interview]

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Rien Fertel: Okay, check, check. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is March 2, 2018. I am in Chapel Hill, just north of town, at the home of Nancie McDermott. And I'm going to have her introduce herself, please.

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Nancy McDermott: I'm Nancie McDermott and I was born and raised in North Carolina. My birth date is April 17, 1952.

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Rien Fertel: Okay. You were just telling me about—well, you brought out these pictures, which are wonderful, of your grandmother and her many siblings. You just said you were born in Chapel Hill. Let's talk about that. Tell me about as far back as you know your family roots go in the area.

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Nancy McDermott: Absolutely. That's actually the perfect place to start talking about me and cookbooks because I feel like it's—there's so many people, because of my grandmother and my experiences when I was very small, that sort of got me started on the food path.

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I was actually born in Burlington, North Carolina and grew up in High Point and those are both forty-five minutes and an hour and a half away from here, so it's still the Piedmont, still the same area. But my mother is from just outside Chapel Hill about five miles outside of town. She grew up on a dairy farm, which was then called the Suitt Place, the last name of my grandfather was William Iverson Suitt.

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Rien Fertel: And how did he spell that?

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Nancy McDermott: S-u-i-t-t. And my grandmother was Nancy McCauley Lloyd Suitt, and I'm named after her. She used to call me my little namesake which I like a lot. My name is spelled with i-e and hers was with a y. But she was from a family in Hillsboro and she married a young man from a family in Durham. It's one of those things, I know my grandmother's side, and like on his side it's—like his mother was an only child and we were very much sort of a Lloyd group. But they ran a dairy farm which people from this area will know because they sold it when granddaddy got too old to run it in the late [19]60s, and it was bought by the Nutter family who named it Maple View Farm. They were a young family, five little kids, and a very successful dairy family who wanted to move down from Maine or New Hampshire or somewhere where it's real cold [*Laughs*] and keep on dairying.

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So because of them it remained a dairy and did not become a housing development [Laughs] like so many dairy farms in the area, you know, all that cleared land. And I feel that I had the perfect rural childhood because we lived in Burlington and High Point in a suburban, southern life. My father: mad-men style. Daddy went to work and wore a hat and mother stayed home, and had taken home economics, so all this sort of country canning and preserving and making coconut cake, not of interest to her. So I grew up on TV dinners and hamburgers and all that sort of baby boomer food. But my grandparents' farm was half an hour to an hour and a half away and so we would go on weekends. We would sometimes go for Sunday dinner. We'd go for third Sunday in May, which is what homecoming at Cane Creek Baptist Church is called and our family reunion.

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I have one picture when I'm small, like two, in my mother's arms, one of the last years that it was on the farm, so it's like one of those things in the front yard with the big sweeping camera of all the kids. So it was a big family because my grandmother was one of twelve siblings. And most of them, I'd say probably eight of them, stayed in the immediate area. One went to Spencer and worked for the railroad and so forth, but so all those twelve and their spouses would bring their kids together every year for the magical, southern family reunion with the entire table [Laughs] of cakes and all the casseroles and all the sweet tea. And actually I wrote about the family in this wonderful book that Eno Press [*sic*: Publishers] did a couple of years ago—Randall Kenan was the editor—and so my southern food story was “Remembering the Family Reunion,” and the last one I went to was probably when I was ten or so but I've always been crazy about food.

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And I can exactly tell you the feeling of being in that—slipping into the big fellowship hall where all the food is put out and just like saying, “Okay, where is Aunt Julia’s chicken pie? And where’s my grandmother’s coconut—?”

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Rien Fertel: You need to look—.

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Nancy McDermott: Yes exactly. I planned! [*Laughs*] It was like going early to get in line at the place doesn’t take reservations. I’ve always been on this obsessed—food has always mattered so much to me.

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Rien Fertel: And why do you think that is?

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Nancy McDermott: I think it’s not just what happened to me. I have two sisters who had pretty much the same experience. I think some people just care—that’s a passion. That’s just something that always struck me as interesting and important and delicious and sort of where the action was, just all the stories, where the food is meaningless but you look at dramas and plays and so forth and around the table, fights, making up: all that.

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It’s just always been fascinating to me and I love to eat and I’ve always loved to cook.

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Rien Fertel: Hmm.

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Nancy McDermott: So in a way kind of natural that I ended up being a food writer but it never seemed that way along the line until much later that I could have done something like majored in journalism or creative writing or—*[Laughs]*. Looking back if I'd known I could have done X, Y, Z, or W, but me being me, I think it's just as well that I've sort of moved sideways and around and kind of come to what—.

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Rien Fertel: That spread you described with all the pies and the casseroles in the fellowship hall, who was doing the cooking? Was it done by generations? Was it done by women mostly?

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Nancy McDermott: It was absolutely done by women. And it was two generations, so it was my mother's generation, and that was Jell-O salads and casseroles, sort of [19]50s baby-boomer mom casseroles, [19]50s, [19]60s, and also the grandmothers, so Aunt Julia was the wife of Uncle Andrew, who has got probably a unibrow and—

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Rien Fertel: We're looking at a picture, a portrait right now of the family.

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Nancy McDermott: Oh, that's him. He was young and handsome looking and he's still got that dark hair, so that's my grandmother's younger brother. And the two of them were very close. And so we'd come visit grandmother and go over to their place. And his wife, Julia, who married into the family, made a chicken pot pie, a chicken pie and it was in a big glass—I remember it oval or Pyrex casserole dish—and it was fabulous pastry and delicious chicken, which would have been free range, organic, just because that's the only kind of chicken you could get then, yes. **[Laughs]** The breasts were not obsessively huge and so it was chicken, white sauce, salt and pepper. There were no carrots, no peas, no seasoning; it was salt. I mean the southern seasonings are salt, pepper, and paprika. **[Laughs]** It was like there—I never knew from herbs until I—it was like anything would grow here. We've got the tomatoes, why don't we have the basil? But it's just sort of what people like.

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But that plain deliciousness I love. That's something my grandmother didn't make, so I remembered that and I wanted to get Aunt Julia's chicken pie. Her family probably didn't really go for that.

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Now I also wanted my grandmother's coconut cake, which she made at Christmas and she made at the family reunion and I mean I remember—you said did the women cook, so it's the two generations. So the elder grandmas cooked and the young women cooked.

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Rien Fertel: Your grandmother's generation?

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Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly, because they were in their sixties and then most of them were still cooking, by the time they wouldn't have been able to cook anymore the reunions kind of faded out. We probably got old enough that we didn't want to ride down there every Sunday and so—but at that time it was the two and just the different kinds of food that people cooked: all the deviled eggs, all the fried chicken, all the—there really wasn't that much variety, but three bean salads were starting to come in from the young folks. And everybody had their thing.

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So Aunt Thelma made caramel cake. My grandmother made coconut cake. Nobody would have brought that. I mean I'm sure everybody knew how to make them, there wasn't that big of a—

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Rien Fertel: No one was double up—

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Nancy McDermott: Right.

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Rien Fertel: There were not two coconut—

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Nancy McDermott: Right, I think it was a small enough thing—none of the younger generation of women were interested in that kind of baking. They were making Jell-O, things that were in the women’s magazines, which I loved. And the ladies kind of had their thing. I mean everybody brought deviled eggs and everybody brought watermelon and rind pickles, but they were sort of—and everybody brought fried chicken. But desserts I saw as very—it’s not really territorial but it’s kind of like that.

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You know you’re going to sing—you know somebody in the church choir who did all the solos [*Laughs*]*—*that that’s kind of a moment of expression. But I didn’t learn to cook from my grandmother but I remember going in the kitchen like early in the morning, like we were staying there maybe in the summer, and we’d go and stay for a week—my sisters and I—or maybe it’s a summer weekend and my whole family is there—and going down in footie pajamas and she would cook—I never thought about she’s now been up for five hours [*Laughs*] probably because she would have cooked. It was a dairy, so she would cook for my grandfather and the farm hands way before I got up.

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So there’s be biscuits and I remember she would scramble eggs and they looked funny. There would be homemade sausage and which she probably made but by the time I thought about that she was gone, and preserves from the pantry. She had a pantry that was a room with a door that had all the glass jars and sour cherry preserves and blackberry preserves and all the corn and tomatoes and things that go in Brunswick stew.

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But I remember the eggs that she would just—they would be yellow with white flecks. And that wasn't how—I mean I didn't even really have that many scrambled eggs, but it looked funny, but I've always been willing to take a chance and I just loved them. And now I realized she had grease in the pot and she broke the eggs in there and just stirred them together with a fork. She didn't beat them and put them so that they were all yellow and homogenized. So it was like the food was always so delicious and so good, and I didn't think about it. I mean I liked my mother's—I like macaroni—I like casseroles, I love TV dinners. I had my favorite TV dinners that I would fight for.

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So it's not that at home this was good and at home it wasn't good, but I just saw great pleasure in that and what I got from my grandmother was that she loved cooking. And I know my mother did not love cooking. And I think maybe if my mother had loved cooking she wouldn't maybe have wanted me to be in there going through her cookbooks. She had like a *Good Housekeeping Cookbook* and her magazines. I mean I know I'm very influenced by *Women's Day* and *Redbook* and *Ladies Home Journal* and all those magazines, and they would have parfaits, and I wanted to grow up and make parfaits. **[Laughs]**

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And one thing about writing cookbooks that I especially wanted to say There's a lot of romanticizing of "Oh, in the olden days,"—mothers used to teach their daughters and nobody teaches them anymore and so we've got to have cooking classes or do better cookbooks or whatever we've got to do to make up for this terrible thing.

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And—

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Rien Fertel: There's like a loss?

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Nancy McDermott: Yeah, that there's a loss and there's a change. And I mean it is a loss; having stuff passed along that's wonderful but it didn't get passed along to the boys [*Laughs*], who might have wanted to cook. And the girls who didn't care about it, which is not me, didn't get to learn about how to fix the tractor or change a tire or make things out of wood or [*Laughs*] not—go to UNC and not WC, Women's College.

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And so I think that just naturally happened as that generation for whom life was so different. My mother went to college. She went to UNC-G [Greensboro] and she took home economics, where they told you, "Maybe you shouldn't be keeping bacon grease on the—" I don't mean it was where there's an emphasis on the four food groups. And your kids should drink milk. And Velveeta cheese is—makes everything better and there is [*Laughs*]—. So there were things happening outside of mothers going off to work and refusing to teach their daughters. I mean my mother wasn't interested in doing any of that.

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And who would be? Canning in August,—in a dairy farm kitchen that's huge with a garden that's probably an acre and a half, and that must have been days and days and days that the four daughters were in there helping and sweating and putting things up for—. And then you find out, "Oh that—Le Sueur has done that." [*Laughs*] The peas were already in the can. So it's

like options, liberation, and so forth. And I love it now because people can come to cooking because they want to, or if they don't really want to but they need to, there's a lot of ways that you can go to the store and get this and that and end up with something and have a lot of things that—I mean how many recipes did my grandmother know? She was a fabulous cook. I'm sure it never occurred to her—

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Rien Fertel: Were those recipes written down?

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Nancy McDermott: Uh, no; not that I know of. I have one that my older sister, Linda, older—like 18 months older, sat with grandmother when she was very old and said, “Tell me about your coconut cake.” And Linda copied it down.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, so you have that?

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Nancy McDermott: Yes. So you know like written down in Linda's hand and that recipe is in the cake book [*Southern Cakes*] and she said—and of course I mean I would assume it was guesstimating. I don't think they were making it at the time. But the icing is—she said you make a one, two, three, four cake, so we know what that means; there would have been nothing special about hers as opposed to anybody else's. And the icing is the coconut juice—but there's never

very much inside a coconut, even if you crack it yourself, like a half a cup to a cup of that and then—I think to make a total of say three cups of water, and flour and sugar. So you're just making a glaze and when that starts to thicken up, you put in grated coconut—and she would have put in freshly grated coconut and just stir it. And then you put that—you split the cake layers so that there's four layers and so it's really gooey and wet. And then—so there's coconut, nubby coconut in it, and then you press coconut on the outside. So it's—

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Rien Fertel: Shredded?

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Nancy McDermott: Yeah, well actually I remembered it being bumpy. I mean I knew it wasn't like the angel flake kind. I mean I definitely remember that. And plus I remember her chopping up the coconut, which I want to come back to in a minute. There's something I want to say about that.

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But I asked my mother [*Laughs*] when she was old, I said, "I remember the coconut cake. The coconut texture was so unusual. It was kind of bumpy little nubs." And the way I did it when I was working out the cake, when I was doing this early on like developing recipes that I wanted to write down, I opened a coconut, sliced off the brown part, put the chunks—I'd cut them, dice them, and then I'd drop them down into a running food processor so that you'd get little bits.

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You could also shred it on a boxed grater, but that would hurt. **[Laughs]** So could do it in a food processor. Anyway, so that's what I've come up with that was about as quick as I could make—that seemed to me the simplest way to get there, and it had that texture. But I knew that that's not what my grandmother had done, and it didn't seem like what would happen if you used a boxed grater in any form. It seems to me it would be either sort of a thin stripy-shreds or tiny—almost the milk would come out. And she said, “Oh, she used the meat grinder.” **[Laughs]** Because of course she made homemade—the great big metal thing that would vice-grip to the side of the kitchen table that would turn pork and spices into sausage.

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Rien Fertel: She just put the fruit right in there?

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Nancy McDermott: Yes.

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Rien Fertel: Huh.

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Nancy McDermott: It would have been washed. And I'm still here, but I mean of course she used the meat grinder. I think, “Oh my god, food safety nightmare.”

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Rien Fertel: But you made do.

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Nancy McDermott: Yes, exactly! But you needed thing to be in little bits. You would think about it. I mean you'd wash it really well, because if you didn't it would smell. So that was something that she used—the kind of thing like me pulling out the food processor or the big mixer or something, you'd get that out. And the thing I wanted to remember to say about the coconut cake is I remember granddaddy sitting down and helping in the kitchen—or helping in the kitchen with cooking, twice. And this was several times over my young life.

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And mostly at Christmas. He would make oyster stew, which I don't know if you're familiar with the Piedmont oyster stew. It's not really stew, it's a soup. So it's milk, it's oysters—poached oysters and their liquid poached in milk with butter, salt, and pepper.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, so it's not real creamy? There's not a roux—?

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Nancy McDermott: No, no, no. It's milk, so it's very milky. I mean it is the texture of hot milk, and it is the flavor of oysters, and it so simple. And it's funny that it's called stew because it's not stew. I mean the oysters go in, as soon as they curl up they're done. And it's a Christmas thing because oysters would be shipped—the thing about the months with the R in it—I'm sure there was oysters all year around, but during probably from November to however long they

could do it, oysters in the olden days would be shipped up in big barrels with ice and seaweed on them. And I'm sure there was refrigeration in trucks involved. But there was still a thing of oysters at Christmas.

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So Christmas Eve, or sometime around that, we would go and we would have oyster stew and I thought the oysters were terrifying and disturbing, but I loved the soup [*Laughs*], which I now realized tasted exactly like oysters. Now I love it all.

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Rien Fertel: And who would make the soup?

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Nancy McDermott: My grandfather.

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Rien Fertel: So he would make it at—?

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Nancy McDermott: He would. Well, he would open the oysters. Now I don't remember if he—he may or may not have stood at the—it may have been that it's like, "I'm grilling. I'm not cooking." But he was very involved with that because that involved opening the oysters, so it's a tech-thing. And for coconut cake, he was sitting at a table and he was putting the ice pick into the eye. There's one soft eye and [*Laughs*] an ice pick. I use a very sharp knife, you can get enough

to do it. But you'd open that up and shake out the juice and then whack it open with a hammer. And then—actually a lot of people put it in the oven, which will cause it to crack.

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Rien Fertel: I didn't know that.

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Nancy McDermott: That's very common, and you put it in 350°F for twenty-five minutes or something and it will—the parts will separate. So then you've got the big scary sharp pieces of the hard shell, and then you've got chunks, and you still need to peel off the brown outside if you want it to be pure white.

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I don't love that method because it cooks it, and so if you—. Then I thought well I'm being a snob, my grandmother cooked it in the sauce—but if you wanted it for grated—say for ambrosia, where it wouldn't be cooked, that's not my favorite. But I know people did that in the olden days, so that's sort of me being precious. And I actually learned to get into a coconut because I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand, and watching people pick up a coconut and take the back of a cleaver to it, or a machete type thing, and give it a couple of whacks. They usually wouldn't even do it over—they usually did not use the liquid inside because the coconuts that we used for cooking are *mah-prao gae*, old coconuts or elderly. They're the ones—so when you see the green ones that you can whack open and drink the juice and eat the meat out and it's like Jell-O, or lovely jelly, those are young coconuts. And they're of no use for cooking. But it's—what do you call it—sterile liquid, and it's not super-sweet but it's a little bit sweet, and it's lovely.

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But for cooking you just—usually you hack all that green stuff off because it would go bad and you don't need it. But that's all cut away and they just lie around until you need them. They keep for months and months and months.

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Rien Fertel: Huh.

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Nancy McDermott: So that's the only kind that anybody ever saw. So granddaddy helped with that, because it's ice picks and it's peeling sharp things, and I don't know if he helped with sausage making, but just some of that. So I just remember at Christmas time granddaddy is opening oysters, and the two of them are getting the coconut ready for her coconut cake.

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Rien Fertel: And should I be—maybe I'm just completely off here, but I feel like I should be surprised that in the 1950s, what was rural North Carolina then, that coconuts were plentiful. Where did they get coconuts or were they—?

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Nancy McDermott: Well they weren't plentiful all year. So this would at Christmas time.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, they would ship them into the stores?

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Nancy McDermott: Exactly. And I think that's old, like they were probably—oysters and coconuts, and people wanted ambrosia. And I'd love to go back and ask somebody, "Where?" She didn't go to the grocery store like my mother came to go to the grocery store. Were they at the Feed & Seed in Hillsboro? Were they at—did somebody bring a truck up? Did you go to Fowler's? That's a good question but it's something that worked all over because coconut things at Christmas time are at every level all through the South and have gone on long-past the time when you couldn't get them.

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Now the question occurred to me later, "Where did she get it in June?" Because the family reunion still is the second Sunday in June. So—

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Rien Fertel: And the coconut cake was there?

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Nancy McDermott: Yeah, always, always, absolutely. So did she use—maybe she used prepared coconut on that. I mean like the Baker's, the angel flake, those kinds of things, I love—I'm a big fan of those. In fact I'm sure that this picture is probably made—the one on the cover of my cookbook, which has a coconut chapter. The shredded, preserved— all that coconut that's been around since the early 1900s. That was opening a coconut, and grating has always been a

hell of a horrible job, and having a shortcut, having a way to do it is something that I think we're more snobby about than people would have been then.

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So there was something about doing it that she loved. But like I said, I don't think all the sisters did that or I don't think they would have minded doing it another way, so—. But that's where I need to get my David Shields book out or—. I'm sure if I post it on Facebook he'll say, "Actually—." Because he knows from stuff like that.

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Like where would you get one in June. But so it may be like cranberries that they could have been around all year, but then there was here's when the time of demand is.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah, they could have ordered them. You talked about your mom not being very interesting in cooking. Did she ever change? Did she get interested in cooking later in life? Did she—?

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Nancy McDermott: No.

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Rien Fertel: No. Was it—?

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Nancy McDermott: I mean she—it was just not her thing. She liked to garden. She liked to dress nicely. She did some sewing. But to her it was just, “I got to do laundry”—it was a household chore, that was her job. But it was just not a source of pleasure. And I think that has made me—I get it and I think it’s important for—it’s ideal for people who are doing recipes and thinking about “We want people to cook” to realize it’s not the same thing for everybody. I wish tomatoes would show up on my back porch but I’ve quickly learned it’s like that’s never going to happen [*Laughs*] in my world. That’s not interesting to me.

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And changing the oil in a car or sports or learning to play a musical instrument, cooking is—there are those of us for whom it’s fun, it’s interesting, it’s exciting, and so forth. And so I’m in one extent I’m writing books for people who who want to do that. But it’s also for people who once in a while want to have—they want to make a gumbo because or Brunswick stew, or that it’s a project or that it’s interesting. And then we all need to eat and it’s self-care, it’s a way to be together with a family. So to me it’s something where sooner or later most people have some way that they need to be connected. And so it’s like I’m open to that. And I really—I like it not to be snobby and—“if you’re going to do this, just don’t even bother unless”—“if you’re too much of a—lazy.” You know what I mean—?

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It’s so interesting to me that I write cookbooks with “Quick and Easy” on the title and some people would absolutely never do that. But if Mark Bittman does a column called “The Minimalist,” it’s quick and easy. [*Laughs*]

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Rien Fertel: It's a fancy word.

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Nancy McDermott: That's exactly right. [*Laughs*] And if that's what it takes for cooking, that's fine. I can't keep wine straight in my head, and when we love to eat out, my husband and I, and on special occasions I love for someone to come over and tell me some things about this one or that one. I won't remember and I want to have—we never buy a bottle. Why would we want a whole lot of one thing when once in a while someone can say, "This, I love this"? It's like, oh, that's such a gift that you know that.

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And this, my first book, was called *Real Thai*, and I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand and I came home and I learned to cook Thai food because I wanted it [*Laughs*], because it was 1978 and there weren't—there were barely Chinese restaurants around where I was in North Carolina. And I had not learned to cook in Thailand because of course I was busy eating and being in my twenties and it didn't occur to me you'll come home and "You'll be bored with the salt, pepper, and paprika world. It's wonderful but it has its limitations.

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So I love all the baking, I love barbecue, I love all the southern food, but you go to Asia or the Middle East or African countries, and it's like they don't want everything—people don't value a giant hunk of meat over five things, each of which are different. I mean the whole construct, the heart of Thai, Chinese—I don't know all Asian cooking, but in a very broad swath you can say that the food is rice. It's literally in the language. It's like rice is food, so, "Have you had your rice today?" is something people will say as a greeting. You don't say, "Actually I had

Pad Thai.” Or, “No, we went for steak, we got pizza. We went to Bangkok and had pizza.” Oh there’s pizza all over Thailand now but—.

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Rien Fertel: But you ate rice for breakfast, rice for—?

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Nancy McDermott: Exactly, exactly. And there’s not—well that’s another thing. Separate breakfast food, that’s kind of sort of British and Western European, it’s like breakfast. People eat eggs all the time. I’m sure we had eggs three times a week as part of the main dinner. It’s cheap. It’s always ready, last minute, endlessly variable. But there’s rice. Everybody is going to get satisfied and then the word for entrée and accompaniments is *gahp kao*, it’s ‘with rice.’ So that is a noun, so, “With what rice should we have?” “What did you have with your rice today?” people say? And so there’s a curry. There’s always a soup, because traditionally you didn’t drink with a meal. You had plain rice, the rice has no seasoning, it has no butter, it has no—it’s water and rice, and the texture should be moist if you’re using chopsticks or it should be loose if you’re eating South Asian style, which is what Thais do. Traditionally the people ate with the fingers of the right hand, and then Western influence came in, and here were spoons and forks and people said, “Dang! That’s good.” [*Laughs*] So now the standard thing is a big spoon and a fork to go with it.

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Nobody in Asia uses chopsticks unless they have the facility to pick up the bowl and take it to the mouth and make a short-trip. *[Laughs]* So the sitting at the table—no wonder we have a hard time with it; nobody does that. *[Laughs]* But it's all good.

00:28:46

But that sense of “I’d rather have a little bit of seven very different things,” different in flavor, different in texture, different in protein-y or not, I want chilies but not just chilies, I want super sour. I want super sweet—. So it was a completely different way of looking at food and possibilities and so forth, and I really fell in love with that. So I wanted that and when I wrote the book I wrote about home cooking. And it’s really simple. I mean you can look through this. There are recipes where the ingredients—go look at that. Here’s—I just opened it—that is like six ingredients, that has four.

00:29:24

Rien Fertel: Right.

00:29:24

Nancy McDermott: That one has seven. For a really, really long recipe—spring rolls—so that’s the filling for the spring rolls, and then the instructions on how to fold them goes on and on and on. Well Thai people don’t make that at home. That’s like Julia Childs’ French bread recipe. That’s something that you get from the street-food people. I looked it up and wrote it out because I want to be able to make it here, but there’s so much Thai cooking. Home cooking is intrinsically streamlined, simple, flavor-oriented, tends toward cheap, because people are doing it every day.

00:30:01

Rien Fertel: But this is what we expect out of the—?

00:30:03

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly. So I think that to be snobbish about things that are simple and doable, and to sort of worship things that are difficult and take a long time, like making incredible ramen broth that took nine days [*Laughs*], and people took turns sleeping over to stir it exactly seven and a quarter hours between—it's like—[*Laughs*]. I'm for people cooking. And so we've all got our snobby things. So I have certainly got my snobby things, but when I write—I remember one of the first things that people said was, "I liked that the book was cheap." So that gave it a good start. And people would say in cooking classes, "I liked it where you said you could use palm sugar or brown sugar."

00:30:50

Rien Fertel: Okay.

00:30:52

Nancy McDermott: And so what is possible? What is the universe? That whole authentic or not. I mean one humbling thing on that is in Northern Thailand they use brown sugar, because guess what? They have sugar cane that grows easily and they don't have many palm trees. It's the north of Thailand. They have teak trees. It's cold. So not that you couldn't find it one place or the other. But I think the wonderful thing for me about writing about Southern food, it's not that

I was such a genius that I already knew all of these things. I said, “I know”—it’s a sales pitch—“I know all this and there will be more.” **[Laughs]** And here’s a list of all the things that will be in there. And then I had to go find them, and along the way to finding them I found out about other stuff I had never heard about.

00:31:38

Now someone is calling me to talk about Lane cake, but it’s like I had to look it up. I knew it as mentioned in *To Kill a Mockingbird* twice. **[Laughs]** It has bourbon in it. I think that might be why it wasn’t real popular up here in North Carolina, because people might have drunk bourbon but they didn’t tell people and they didn’t put it in a cake. **[Laughs]** It’s like you did that behind closed doors. You know guys out behind the barn and maybe there was some blackberry cordial and maybe do some sherry that was put on the fruitcake. It’s funny how they went through a whole bottle and it—but anyway.

00:32:09

So **[Laughs]**—so the regional differences, the specificity, the ways, the fact that I can’t bring it all together and say, “Okay I will now—I’ve figured out gumbo. It’s this, this, and this and this and if it’s not that, it’s not that.” Because every time I’d find a rule it’s like, “Oh, but it will never have tomatoes at all. It always has filé.” And then here’s somebody saying the exact opposite thing. And it’s like, oh, well which is better, Duke or Carolina? Or which kind of music? Or what’s the best record of the year? We love that ranking, and it’s fun, it’s fun to have a competition. But I think all any of us are saying is, “I like this. This is my favorite. This is what I’ve found out about it, and not to—.” Because I researched, so I wanted to show you my—how I do. Let’s see, where’s one? I had ones that—

00:33:09

Rien Fertel: And we're looking through like manila envelopes now, or folders—

00:33:12

Nancy McDermott: So here is a very thin one, and so when I'm writing books, so for my fruit book, the Southern *Fruit*, which is *The Savor the South* series by UNC Press, we started with wild persimmons, scuppernong and muscadine grapes, and figs and they already had a book on peaches. And we'd been talking about things, and I kept saying, "What about coconut? What about this?" And they'd say "Meh, no." They had specific things that they wanted.

00:33:38

Rien Fertel: So three fruits that we don't use a lot of?

00:33:41

Nancy McDermott: Right! Yes, and they're quintessentially Southern, like people don't even know there's this persimmon that's the size of a ping-pong ball and that whole southern—even in the South everybody doesn't know that, much less that there are the other ones that we can get at the grocery store.

00:33:57

People don't know scuppernong and muscadine grapes. North Carolinians with a traditional background know, but a lot of people are here but don't know that. Or, they've come into the grocery stores—I'd say the last five years there's commercial growing—well there's always been commercial growing for super-sweet wine—but they've sort of come into a lasting

commercial state, where from August to maybe the first of October you can get both muscadines, which are the purple ones, and scuppernongs, which are the sort of tawny golden kind, and figs. Of course there are figs in the grocery store but those are the ones from California. The little southern ones, brown turkey is one kind, where there's a fig bush, again they come in and they go and they get eaten up and you never—I mean I don't think of seeing lots of figs even at the farmers' market, there's just sort of not that many of them. People eat them. They preserve them. And so the Okracoke Island fig cake, I was stunned, is not made with fresh figs. It's made with preserved figs, ideally whole ones, preserved whole, and their syrup. And I said, "Why wouldn't they use fresh ones? Fresh is better." Which it isn't. That's something that when I first came into food I thought it was always true, and perfect is better, not always true.

00:35:25

And it's like, "Oh my gosh," figs come in in the heat of summer. You don't want to go make a cake. And you want to get them off the tree and fight the birds for them and preserve them. And the cake is just a jam cake. It is a sort of pound cakey jam cake that you make all winter long. Fried pies traditionally made with dried fruit, not fresh fruit, because the apples come in, you make applesauce and you make apple butter. I mean apples were huge. Farms would have different kinds of trees. These are the cider apples and these are the baking apples and these are really good for drying.

00:36:04

Rien Fertel: Even in the South?

00:36:04

Nancy McDermott: Even in the South. There's a wonderful book called *Old Southern Apples* by Creighton Lee Calhoun, which went out of print. I think UNC Press brought it back. And it's marvelous. And he was a retired Military guy, I think he's from North Carolina, and he lives in Pittsboro, which is maybe fifteen miles from here. And he was just sort of interested in botany and started finding twigs of varieties of apples on old sort of abandoned land and preserving them, because he just got real interested in that. And people started coming to him and saying this is from my cousin's yard and this is old such-and-such and the names. And he talks about how it was so common and the least likely thing you'd do with an apple is pick it up and eat it.

[Laughs]

00:36:53

I mean you'd even keep them whole and then take them and make applesauce with them or fry them with—I mean fried apples with sausage, mercy I love—still love that. That's something my mother did. So that's kind of in the quick and easy. It was sausage, it was probably an earlier version of Jimmy Dean. It was whatever was on sale at the A&P. But sausage with apples, things like that were intuitive and delicious and so forth, we had that.

00:37:19

Rien Fertel: Just fried together in a pan?

00:37:20

Nancy McDermott: Well you fried the sausage and you'd leave the grease and then you fry sliced apples with the skin on in the sausage grease. So pork and apples is like, how far back

does that go? So that would be like a supper. You wouldn't have it for breakfast, but that would be like a cold weather or wintertime supper with three vegetables and light bread.

00:37:40

I mean I remember [*Laughs*] my grandmother who made biscuits. She made cornbread, sort of flat in the pan, and I remember it would be like a pizza slice. She would pour it in and so it would have a weird shape. She'd kind of cut it and then she'd slice it open and then you'd butter that and it was so grainy and it had sort of a corn tortilla quality to it, and hot rolls. She was brilliant at all of those. But by the time I remember noticing this was like not little kid time, there would always be a plate on the table, like a dessert plate size, with a stack of white bread, like Merita or Sunbeam, some fluffy kind of where the ads would be, "You can tear it in half and it's vertically straight." Which means no texture, no flavor, no nutritional value. And it was called light bread. And I've seen that written—

00:38:31

Rien Fertel: Light with an L—light bread?

00:38:32

Nancy McDermott: Yes. And this was before you know light, like diet, like no fat, but it was called light bread.

00:38:39

Rien Fertel: Spelled l-i-t-e?

00:38:40

Nancy McDermott: No. L-i-g-h-t.

00:38:41

Rien Fertel: Really?

00:38:42

Nancy McDermott: Light bread, like that's something—that's David Shields; get me David Shields.

00:38:44

Rien Fertel: Yeah, that's interesting.

00:38:46

Nancy McDermott: And like that would be on the table. No one touched it. Why would you? You're at grandmother's and there's all this stuff, but the light bread would be sitting there.

00:38:54

Rien Fertel: Had to be there.

00:38:54

Nancy McDermott: Yeah. So I thought is that some modern thing? Is that something like a little frou-frou thing that you have a sauce that nobody really uses.

00:39:04

Rien Fertel: I want to ask a few questions leading us to your first cookbook.

00:39:07

Nancy McDermott: Yes.

00:39:09

Rien Fertel: You went to college?

00:39:09

Nancy McDermott: Yes.

00:39:11

Rien Fertel: Where did you go to college?

00:39:11

Nancy McDermott: I started at Virginia Tech, and I graduated from UNC, Class of [19]73.

00:39:15

Rien Fertel: Okay.

00:39:16

Nancy McDermott: Carolina, right here.

00:39:16

Rien Fertel: And you—

00:39:18

Nancy McDermott: UNC [*Laughs*]—

00:39:21

Rien Fertel: You said your mom went to college. What what did your father do? What was his profession?

00:39:23

Nancy McDermott: He was an attorney. He was Irish. This is Daddy in the *Mad Men* hat at the Carolina Inn, which is sort of right next to the heart of campus. He came to—this is daddy at—so he was born in 1920, so this was probably 1922. He was the oldest of I think five. That's his—at that time only sister Betty, more were to come, and he was the son of Irish immigrants who came over to Ellis Island young and ended up working at a big mansion on Long Island.

00:39:58

And my grandfather, who was called Pop, was a mechanic, drove the car, chauffeur, and my grandmother Ellen Norah Smith worked in the house. And so they got married and move into New York City and he was born on East 53rd Street, like a block away—

00:40:16

Rien Fertel: Your father?

00:40:16

Nancy McDermott: My father, so he was first generation Irish American and he would talk about my grandmother Nellie who would save dimes and nickels and put them into the fund for building St. Patrick's Cathedral. And he was born in a five-floor walk-up with a bathroom on the hall. The Citi Corp Building is on that block—yeah, totally. He went to the Kips Bay Boys Club. He went to—he was always studious. He loved to learn. My Aunt Helen, who grew up in New York City with him, and then she and her husband ended moving out to California and then Oregon, and they were very close and they stayed in touch. And so when we started going to family reunions out there, after I had my kids and was grown, and I hadn't really grown up with them because they were in New York and we were in North Carolina, and Aunt Helen remembered racing daddy. She and their young brother Jackie would all race home from mass to try to get back to the apartment first because whoever got there first controlled the radio for Sunday afternoon.

00:41:23

And you know what they would play [*sings*] “Da, da, da”—1930s; Daddy would put it on the classical station. [*Laughs*] And he was not going to change it. So he was always interested—he went to the High School of Commerce. He was working on Wall Street and once taking college courses when he went and joined the Marines at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in like 1940.

00:41:48

And he became a Marine and came to Chapel Hill to teach riflery in Chapel Hill, because the campus—that was one of the part of the war effort was the part of the UNC campus became a—and I thought, “Where exactly did they do that? I mean I knew this and now he passed away in 1989 and it’s like, “Where exactly did that happen?” I mean—

00:42:09

Rien Fertel: Huh; so during the war he was—?

00:42:10

Nancy McDermott: During the war. So he was here in like 1941, [19]42, [19]43. My grandmother is—my mother grew up on that dairy farm outside of town and she came in. She had gone to now UNC-G, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, hour away, which was then WC, the Women’s College of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And she was—her sister had passed away, so she had gone to college for a couple years and then just came back home and was working in an office, secretarial work, and so a friend introduced them and they went out and fell in love and got married. And then he shipped out. They took a train trip to Danville for a honeymoon, and then he shipped out. And so after World War II was over, he came back here, and they always—he wanted to come back here. He fell in—and he adopted himself as a Southerner. He loved North Carolina. He loved the farm. I mean not like I’m going to go out and you know plant corn [*Laughs*] kind, but he just loved the whole aspect of it and the family. And so he went to Carolina on the GI Bill and he wanted to go to law school.

00:43:20

So he actually went straight through and got his law degree in, I don't know, like 1952 or something like that.

00:43:25

Rien Fertel: Did he have a New York Irish accent?

00:43:28

Nancy McDermott: No, not a bit.

00:43:29

Rien Fertel: He didn't have it.

00:43:30

Nancy McDermott: Not a speck. And not even—not like a super-New York accent. I mean you could tell that he wasn't Southern, but no. And so that was real interesting to me that both of my grandparents [*Laughs*—my grandmother would say, [*Irish accent*] “Shut up, you know nothing.” [*Laughs*] That's a particular favorite. And when during college I went up with friends to go to New York City on spring break, senior year, we borrowed somebody's car and we stayed at a Y and then we all came out and camped at their apartment. By then they were in Woodside, Queens and you know like in a big high-rise, all the kids were grown, and gone. And so she didn't know me well growing up, but it's like of course we could come there.

00:44:10

And so we arrived and there was like tables pushed together and there was a leg of lamb and there was a whole chicken and there was meatballs, whatever. There were like five meats and nine vegetables and bread that was like real chewy and hard, and so we would eat and we'd say, "Oh!" She'd say, [*Irish accent*] "Have some more of this, have some more of that." And we'd say, "Oh, no. Mama I'm fine; thank you so much. It's all delicious." And she'd say, [*Irish accent*] "Oh you don't like it; I'll take it away." [*Laughs*] So of course you'll have some more. [*Laughs*]

00:44:42

Rien Fertel: You hurt her feelings.

00:44:45

Nancy McDermott: Exactly. And I stepped back from that experience and I said—[*Irish accent*] "And Mrs. Murphy made a chocolate cake." And I thought chocolate cake? Isn't it chocolate cake? It's a friend had made a cake. She wasn't much of a baker but she needed a dessert—I mean I thought that was—to me looking back there is just so much in that. And I thought—and it's exactly the same. I don't know if my grandmother ever knew there was such a thing as leg of lamb, except like the lamb of God in the bible, but nobody ever—family reunion nothing, lamb was not on the list to like or not like.

00:45:20

But the whole too much food and everybody gathering around and hurt feelings if you don't eat more, and I'm sure that there probably would have been dishes that somebody was

famous for and somebody was—oh, there was soda bread. I remember soda bread is like, “Well, this is awesome.” *[Laughs]* But it’s like you didn’t just up and make that.

00:45:39

So that part was familiar to him. So they decided to stay here. My mother also went to UNC. I guess—I don’t know if women could generally go, but she was married then, so she finished her degree and he—so there’s a picture of her graduation day. This is probably her graduation.

00:46:00

Rien Fertel: Did they meet on campus or do you know how—?

00:46:02

Nancy McDermott: Well, a friend. I mean she was working on campus and he was doing his—so they were Marine buddies and she had a good friend, who was like getting the date, so it was all this matchmaking going on. So they went on a blind date with another, a friend of hers who was dating a Marine who was in town for a similar kind of thing. And then that went on. And he loved my grandparents. My grandparents loved him. When he met my great-grandmother, my grandfather’s mother, who had married very young and just had one child and lived with my grandparents when she—so she was very old. She died probably a year and a half after I was born, so I have no memory of her, but I’ve got pictures, and she’s like little bird-like, a little teeny sweet woman. And daddy remembered being in—“Grandmother this is Jimmy.” And he said, “How do you do Mrs. Suitt?” And she said, “Why, you’re a Yankee.” She wasn’t mad. She just said, so you asked me, I guess—he didn’t sound like he was from around here.

00:47:03

Rien Fertel: What an intro.

00:47:04

Nancy McDermott: Right. [*Laughs*] But it worked out.

00:47:06

Rien Fertel: That's wonderful. What was his full name?

00:47:09

Nancy McDermott: James Patrick McDermott.

00:47:11

Rien Fertel: So you go to college here, and what did you study? What did you major in?

00:47:17

Nancy McDermott: English.

00:47:17

Rien Fertel: Okay.

00:47:18

Nancy McDermott: Because it was the least—I mean I love to read and I could you know at 9:30 at night I could go through a book, finish it, and write a paper and still—. [*Laughs*] But in the morning it's not my best feature. But I mean I love that but I think it was twelve hours. I mean I think you had to have four courses to be an English major, and I wanted to take religion and I took Japanese and I took sociology of whatever. I didn't want to sort of be locked into something with a lot of requirements. And it didn't occur to me that—I didn't think I'd be writer, so I didn't—I just never thought about that. I knew I didn't want to do teaching, because everybody said get your teaching certificate and you can always fall back on it. And I thought, “I am not going to just fall into—.” And it's like falling back on your teaching certificate. But I wanted to see the world. I mean I had been watching those Peace Corps commercials. I had gotten—my father got me a book at the Intimate Bookshop which was on Franklin, that main part of Franklin Street. It was like the Kuralt—Charles Kuralt's brother ran it, and it's like a Chapel Hill institution that had wooden floors and sawdust, and that's the place I went to get the Village Voice when we were going to this trip.

00:48:26

Rien Fertel: You can get it here?

00:48:28

Nancy McDermott: Yes; that's the kind of place it was: steps, upstairs.

00:48:36

Rien Fertel: What did the Peace Corps mean then? Did you go to the Peace Corps right out of college?

00:48:39

Nancy McDermott: After a year. I graduated and just got a job at the University to live in Chapel Hill and think about it. But I had seen when I was little, that we would always come in from the dairy farm and go there, but there was a book called *The Time Life Religions of the World*. And it was like for kids; it was you know probably for twelve year-olds. And it was all photographs and there were pictures of monks at the Shwedagon Pagoda, I'm sure I said that wrong, in Burma. And there was the Holy Festival in India. And there was a picture of a young boy in Japan doing—making respect at an altar and the Daibutsu, the Great Buddha of Kamakura, with a little teeny watermelon, a round watermelon. It's like, "Whoa, round watermelon." I mean I had that and I thought I want to go see these places. I want to see the world. I want to experience.

00:49:31

I had no idea about—I didn't even know about the food. [**Laughs**] That was just the look.

00:49:36

Rien Fertel: Were you doing some cooking? You hadn't done cooking at—?

00:49:38

Nancy McDermott: Oh yes. I loved cooking. I was cooking cake mix. I was making rice pudding because it was on the back of the instant rice box. I don't think rice pudding is southern.

People may—please correct me on that, but I never had it, never saw it; my grandmother didn't make it. I think it's sort of more northern. I mean rice is very particular. I don't remember—if you're in the Low Country rice is every day, it's every meal, it's completely different. But I don't know that translated into rice pudding. I just think if they have it in every New York deli how Southern could it be? **[Laughs]**

00:50:10

Rien Fertel: That's right. **[Laughs]**

00:50:11

Nancy McDermott: I mean but I read about it in *The Poky Little Puppy* because he didn't get his rice pudding because he was late. He was like, "I want—"

00:50:17

Rien Fertel: I loved that book as a kid.

00:50:19

Nancy McDermott: I was that puppy. **[Laughs]** I think they had a picture, so I wanted to make that so we had instant rice. It's like: there it was; I made it. It was delicious. So that's another reason I think snobbishness can get in the way because I did what I could do. My mother didn't show me. She didn't know. She didn't care. But she needed a dessert for bridge parties. She had a bridge party like every two months and I would look something up in one of those magazines. There was one like angel food cake bought from the store and you made whipped cream and

mint something—I don't know—it was [*Laughs*] foamy and pretty and everybody loved it. So you know I got used to like, “Oh, I can cook.” And people say it's great. And it was fun to do.

00:51:00

To this day I am almost never too tired to cook. I'm too tired to take notes and write it down maybe like I should do [*Laughs*], but that's always—that appeals—there's just something about it that I love. I know beyond all reason, so I feel like that lets me go dig around. I also love stories and like tracking things down. And everybody says “Well, this. That velvet cake was from the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.” And it was like that doesn't even make sense. [*Laughs*] So I love going down those rabbit holes and so I started doing this at the perfect time of—it's just gotten more and more possible to sort of go wider and get stories and the research part of it, the detective work, the putting things together especially—so I love to go to the grocery stores, food shopping, any of that any time, including like the local Harris Teeter.

00:51:53

I can't get out in under an hour. I'm just meandering. I'm wandering. I'm looking something up on my phone now. That's made it worse. So I was always cooking probably since I was ten. And like from—I made casseroles for my mother's—the little *Good Housekeeping Cookbook*. And so it was all that Home-Ec oriented but that's a great base. I got confident. I knew I could cook and make things. There was only praise. [*Laughs*] My mother was glad I was doing it; my father loved to eat. It kept me out of trouble. So it's actually funny that while I was in Thailand, I mean what I wanted to cook while I was in Thailand was brownies and cake. And I had two little charcoal stoves and of course no oven. But there's sort of the Peace Corps missionary grapevine, and people said in Bangkok you go to Yaowarat, which is a Chinatown area, and there's a street where metal things are and I bought a big metal thin aluminum or tin

some kind of box that had a hole in the middle and a rack inside, and so you would set it over the charcoal stove with lots of coals in it and let it heat up, and then I could mix—you bought butter in a can, there's Danish—Denmark, all the Europeans serving the foreign service and missionaries and there's that whole network of things—cream, milk, butter was all available. Now it's available freshly made, but cocoa, anything shelf-stable in a can, you could go find somewhere in Thailand.

00:53:32

And so I made brownies. *[Laughs]*

00:53:35

Rien Fertel: Did they hold up?

00:53:36

Nancy McDermott: They were okay, yeah. I mean I make brownies with cocoa anyway. They were the best brownies I'd ever had in my life because I didn't know any other way to get them *[Laughs]* and no one loved them. You know Thai people said, "Oh, so interesting." *[Laughs]* "You worked so hard; these must mean a lot to you." *[Laughs]* Looking back I now realize that it wasn't the same response that I got at home in America, but that was what was important to me at the time.

00:54:01

And when we went into Bangkok we went to the place that had pizza. We went to the place that had a burger. It was all because delicious Thai food was all around me. And I totally appreciated that. And when I came back and was living in New York or teaching school in

Greensboro and I'd just sort of be in a situation and sometimes friends and people would say, "Oh, well let's go get Thai food." It's like, "Oh no, wait; you said you had Thai food for lunch." And it's like, "When I was in Thailand that's all I had." **[Laughs]** For me it's not sort of a whim. It's another wonderful way to eat. So that was—.

00:54:39

But you know remember I said I would not teach school because that was—and but I wanted to join the Peace Corps and that was—first, when I was little I would say I want to be a missionary and my mother was bragging about that. And it's like I want to—that was because I wanted to see the world. Once I found out what you actually had to do it's like well no; I don't—but I still want to travel. So the Peace Corps was perfect and I asked for—I was just interested in Asia and then that book, it was *Religions of the World*, but it was really religions of Asia, but actually the had Christianity but that too is a religion of—. It's roots over everywhere but here.

00:55:12

And—

00:55:13

Rien Fertel: So you just picked Asia?

00:55:16

Nancy McDermott: Yeah; I just said my preference.

00:55:17

Rien Fertel: Not Thailand specifically?

00:55:18

Nancy McDermott: Oh no, no and I mean I wanted to go. At the time it was Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. And so I said preference for Asia, and they said how about English as a second—secondary English in Thailand, and I said great.

00:55:34

Rien Fertel: So that would be your job then?

00:55:35

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, and there was a program. It was leaving in March and that was completely fine with me. I had no idea, nothing about Thai food, anything—.

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Rien Fertel: There was no cultural schooling?

00:55:47

Nancy McDermott: Oh, there was, yes. I mean as far as me saying I want to go Thailand it was like—

00:55:53

Rien Fertel: You didn't go to eat Pad Thai?

00:55:54

Nancy McDermott: Right. Yes; no, very few—I didn't think, "Oh gosh, the food will be really great." [*Laughs*] It was like I wanted to go live in Asia, and at the time there were programs in Korea, I'm trying to think—it has always changed with sort of with the way that the world has gone.

00:56:13

But I just feel—and it was secondary education and it's like, "Sure, I can." And my qualification was I am fluent in English. [*Laughs*] So of course I can go teach Thai seventh and eighth graders. And the big surprise was I loved that. That is a wonderful way—if the goal is to go and live and learn and of course serve that culture, but they didn't need me at all. And every Peace Corps commercial says, "I got so much more than I gave." But it's really true.

00:56:42

Rien Fertel: So where were you in Thailand?

00:56:42

Nancy McDermott: I was in Surin Province, which is on the Cambodian border.

00:56:45

Rien Fertel: And how do you spell that?

00:56:46

Nancy McDermott: S-u-r-i-n.

00:56:48

Rien Fertel: Okay.

00:56:51

Nancy McDermott: Do I have a map in this one? Nope I have a map in subsequent ones. But it's—

00:56:54

Rien Fertel: North, south?

00:56:56

Nancy McDermott: It's the northeast, so Thailand is like an elephant in profile, so there's a bit—so we're looking this way, so there's a big ear and then the nose goes way down there. And so that big ear is the northeast. And the northern-most part is the north. The center of that whole landmass is Bangkok and Central Thailand, what we mostly know, and then the little skinny part is southern Thailand.

00:57:23

Rien Fertel: The beaches and stuff—

00:57:23

Nancy McDermott: Yeah right, the beaches and coastal and inland south, much more—I mean it’s all tropical but that’s really sort of the beach resorts. And so the northern chunk and the top of the northeastern chunk border Laos. And so both Northern Thailand and Northeastern Thailand are very Laotian. Northeastern Thailand, where I was, the basic language is a Lao Thai, and people can completely understand each other.

00:57:59

I was in one of three provinces at the very bottom of that ear, which is the border of Cambodia. And those three provinces Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket had been—they’ve been Cambodia. So all this has gone back and forth. That whole northeast where they speak Lao-Lao, it’s like in 18-something or other the Thais won and moved the border back here. So all of that is very mixed.

00:58:23

There’s not an Eastern Thailand. That would be Burma. So Burma, Laos, Cambodia are all sort of gathered around Thailand and then you go down the little strip and come to Singapore and Malaysia and down ultimately Indonesia.

00:58:41

Rien Fertel: Okay.

00:58:41

Nancy McDermott: So all the—oh, and Vietnam is on the other side of—so Laos comes around Thailand and then there’s Cambodia and right on the other side of that border in Laos is Vietnam. Though Vietnam although physically right there has always been isolated. It was a

colony of China for 1,000 years so there were sort of political things and mountains, so Vietnamese—so that whole Southeast Asia, to me it's the most fascinating part of the world. I'm just getting started with what I would just love to know so much more and—

00:59:14

Rien Fertel: What were your first impressions? I mean did you just kind of—I imagine you went to Bangkok first and then went by bus or boat, however you got to this outpost of sorts.

00:59:25

Nancy McDermott: Well there's—I mean Peace Corps is—you're really coddled. You're really sort of taken care of. It's probably pretty similar to this now, but there's a three-month training time where you decide if you like it and they decide if you're—they were a couple of cases probably where someone went home and—mostly it was sort of a mutual thing. But we were—but I remember arriving and my first impression was, "It's hot." It was midnight and this was get off the plane and walk across the tarmac and it was—I'm from North Carolina. I know hot but it was just—

00:59:58

Rien Fertel: Was it rainforest jungle? Was it—?

00:59:59

Nancy McDermott: Oh no. No, no; I mean it was Bangkok so it was—

01:00:02

Rien Fertel: Oh, Bangkok, okay, right.

01:00:03

Nancy McDermott: So you land in Bangkok, and we were there maybe two or three days in a hotel that had a coffee shop with club sandwiches and eggs over easy, very speaking English, very sort of coddled. The hotel had a pool, so we immediately it's like we're all out at the pool being Peace Corps volunteers in Thailand.

01:00:21

And then within two days we took probably a train up to like two hours away to a medium-sized city. It was called Nakhon Sawan and it's just a middle—no tourism reason to go there. We lived at a hotel and had language training for six weeks.

01:00:41

And cross-cultural training. And it was just sort of adjusting, you're around people who speak English, you're around former Peace Corps volunteers who are your cross cultural trainers who know you, and you're around Thai language teachers who know Thailand. And it was just the most brilliant, wonderful way to ease in. So you can be—it's like I wanted to go to the market and use my language. And some people didn't want to do that. And I really wanted to learn the language and so that means go to a place where nobody speaks English very well.

01:01:15

So I was going for that. I always wanted—I want control; I'm kind of a control freak.

01:01:21

Rien Fertel: Right.

01:01:22

Nancy McDermott: So—

01:01:22

Rien Fertel: What did your parents think? Were they—

01:01:25

Nancy McDermott: They thought that was just like me [*Laughs*]. I mean I—

01:01:27

Rien Fertel: They recognized that that's something you would do.

01:01:28

Nancy McDermott: Yes. I had always kind of been that kind of person, the being gone for two years and not only not email, no phone. I went away for two years and I wrote letters. And now I see those aerogrammes and it's like, oh my gosh. I'm so glad that—it was hard. I don't mean Candyland and there were hard lessons. It was just you're in your twenties and you're throwing yourself in situations, but it was hard in ways that were interesting and it was challenging in ways that were—it was exactly what I wanted it to be. I just didn't know—it's kind of like, "Oh I want to have children." [*Laughs*]. "Nobody told me about this part. Why didn't anybody tell me

that?” And it’s like, you don’t want people to tell you that. You’ll get through it. Now go do—stop thinking about this and just go be in the time that you’re in now.

01:02:17

So six weeks there, language class every day, go out for noodles and use your language. And Thai people laugh. They’re laughing; they’re here to have fun. And so when I would say [*Makes noise*] doing my best they would often say—it’s a tonal language so you’re never just saying gobbled gook. You said something that is not what you wanted to say and they call people and say, “Say it again, say it again.” And the new person would go [*Laughs*] and they’d go get somebody to come over.

01:02:46

So this was very—[*Ironic sad voice*] they were not very nice. That was hard on me but it’s like I needed that. I needed to sort of be a baby to get through it. And then after six weeks there we went to job training, so all the secondary education people went way up north, again we probably took the train, like as a group, tour group. You didn’t have to do anything that was stressful. We got a little per diem so we could go around and spend money but we didn’t have check into the hotel or—. So we did a teacher training at a girls’ high school in Chiang Rai Province which is way, way, way north. It’s now a big city but it was a small city. And lived at a hotel. Again had some language training but practiced teaching, and what is the Thai education system like. And so by the time I went to Surin Province, went back to Bangkok and then took the train out and was met by my principal, who took me up to my house. Everything is all taken care of. You have the income level of a civil servant, which makes you not wealthy but way better off than half, than so many people.

01:03:54

So it was just all decisions made, things taken care of, and you're plopped into the world as a teacher, which is a position of reverence and respect and people get it. They didn't get why I was there. People would say, "Don't you miss your mother?" I'll go, "When I was home I had my own apartment. Do you not understand?" It was like no; they didn't understand. **[Laughs]** They couldn't understand. But I was welcomed to be there and let's go to the such and such. They were hospitable but I really was from Mars. And it took me a while to say, "I'm from Mars. Be from Mars." Stop trying so hard to be from here because you're not and no one is buying it. **[Laughs]** And just relax into—it was just like six months, a year, two years. At the end of two years, it was time to come home and I ended up extending for a third year and lived in Bangkok. Got an apartment with other Peace Corps volunteers and taught at a university, again fluency in English. I taught American literature even though I didn't have a Master's Degree. But it was to have an English fluent teacher.

01:05:04

And I saw a very different side of Thailand, young people who live in Bangkok and were going to the arts-oriented university. And so it was just this whole incredible rich immersion. But at the end of three years I was ready to come home. I wanted to come back and I thought I would sort of—I didn't know the word expatriate then but was sort of like I'll do that and then I'll do this and then I'll just spend my life in the world. And I really wanted to come back where I got it about sort of the general scenario.

01:05:35

Came back to North Carolina and got my teaching certificate and taught seventh and eighth grade English and Social Studies. Loved it. It was perfect for me. **[Laughs]** It was like this thing that I had resisted but then I did it and I love that age of kids, not too little. They don't need

a lot of hand-holding, but not you know not high schoolers, so that Ms. Frizzle and the Magic School Bus, all of that. And of course we cooked. I brought in my electric frying pan and we made potstickers or—

01:06:04

Rien Fertel: In the classroom?

01:06:05

Nancy McDermott: In the classroom, whatever, it was Social Studies. So it was like seventh grade or eighth grade was “the World,” so it’s like of course you learn better if you’re having spring rolls or something. But then that got too quiet so I moved to New York City. And had friends who had moved up right after college and moved in—again easy—I just like moved into a room in an apartment that someone else had worked from here to here to here to get.

01:06:33

Rien Fertel: What year was that?

01:06:33

Nancy McDermott: That was I think 1980; may have been 1981.

01:06:39

Rien Fertel: Okay, and what year did you arrive back here from the Peace Corps?

01:06:41

Nancy McDermott: [19]78.

01:06:43

Rien Fertel: [19]78, okay.

01:06:44

Nancy McDermott: [19]78 and I taught school for a couple of years, lived in Greensboro, taught in High Point, and I was from High Point and of course they knew me. It's like, "Sure, you can have a job." **[Laughs]** And then went up to New York to see if I liked it when I wasn't just there for the weekend with all my cash. **[Laughs]** And I met my husband standing in line at the movies in New York City.

01:07:06

Rien Fertel: What movie theater and what movie?

01:07:08

Nancy McDermott: Well it was *From Mao to Mozart*, Isaac Stern's tour of China, which is exactly where anybody would think I would be.

01:07:15

Rien Fertel: Is that a documentary? Is it—

01:07:15

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, it was. It was a documentary. It was when going to China was worthy of a movie. I mean it was like—

01:07:21

Rien Fertel: Was closed off.

01:07:22

Nancy McDermott: It was like ping-pong diplomacy time almost. And he was a graduate student. He was getting his doctorate at Cornell Medical College and researching in the lab, and it was like late at night so he came over and it's like he liked French movies, black and white where people were smoking, and so I don't know what he was doing there. It was very unlike him to be there, but we started talking in line and then got ice-cream afterwards and stayed in touch that year, and then I moved up and we got together. He lived on the East Side and I lived on the West Side, and when he finished his degree in 1985 and had a post-doc in southern California, we moved to Irvine, California.

01:08:02

Rien Fertel: Okay.

01:08:02

Nancy McDermott: And that's really where the cooking part of it, it's in Greensboro I learned to cook. I had an English-language cookbook. I had students who were from especially Hmong families who were coming out of Laos, so I was—

01:08:20

Rien Fertel: Post-Vietnam War?

01:08:22

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly. This was [19]78. There was still refugee resettlement going on where people had been in camps for years. And so I made friends with their families. And then when I moved to New York I could go to Chinatown and get lemongrass and galangal and I could go to Thai restaurants, and there were Thai temples around already.

01:08:45

So that's when I started cooking more, just more ambitiously, kind of remembering things and going beyond just a dinner party for my friends. And I dabbled in catering.

01:08:57

Rien Fertel: And you had one cookbook, one English-language Thai cookbook—

01:09:01

Nancy McDermott: Yes. Well there were two. There was one that I brought from Thailand that was like a spiral bound and it was *Cooking Thai Food in American Kitchens*.

01:09:09

Rien Fertel: Oh, okay.

01:09:09

Nancy McDermott: And I disdained it at first because it was—you remember I had said the thing about palm sugar versus brown sugar? And so the woman was Malulee Pinsuvana and her husband was I'm sure a highly ranking military officer, and so they had spent time in Arizona and places for his military career. And so she knew that you couldn't get this and that and the other, so she would say you can use this or that. And I thought, "Hmm. So tacky. Better not to make it." And then when I started writing this book, I looked back at that and it had Thai in English and I learned enough. Thai is an alphabet. It's not characters, there's forty letters and since it was all about food, I can read a menu and I can read a cookbook because it's the same information over and over again. Newspaper, I don't have a prayer. But I would look at the names of things and she had dishes that I hadn't thought about in so long.

01:10:15

And she was right. This dish maybe she should have said you can't make it rather than you can use canned biscuit dough to make bao, the puffy breads. It's like that doesn't work very well. I tried. **[Laughs]** But if you absolutely must have them this is as close as you can come and her curry pastes were spot on. And I found dishes where the things were available, so that gave me—that was humbling to see that this resource that I had disdained—

01:10:44

There's another book called *The Original Thai Cookbook* by Jennifer Brennan, who is British. I think she had grown up in like a British colonial family in Burma or India or

somewhere. So she had lived in Thailand. And so that was the first—oh, three cookbooks, so the one that I brought by Malulee Pinsuvana, Jennifer Brennan’s *The Original Thai Cookbook*, which was written for westerners, and Charmaine Solomon’s *The Complete Asian Cookbook*, which is this big [***Gestures***]. And I believe she’s still living. She’s in Australia. She had grown up in Burma. She’s I believe she’s South Asian, so possibly Indian or from Sri Lanka, I’m not sure. But she had grown up in Burma and was living in Asia. I believe her husband was a diplomat. And so she did a book and there’s a chapter on Laos, Cambodia, Burma. There were no books, and it’s really, really good. It’s limited, it’s not perfect. But it is an incredible, to this day, resource on just sort of a very respectful detailed—each of those as a cuisine and so among those three I could like—.

01:11:59

And that gave me an appreciation for—so this thing lemongrass, well in Thai it’s *takhîr* and in Vietnamese it’s *công sả*. What do they call it in Malaysian? And what do they— so all the English language names and so forth so I tried to in my glossary cover all the things that you would come across because I would look something up and it’s like wait, because people want to go to the Asian market and find a sign that says that thing and it’s like good luck with that, or ask somebody and the person stocking things is probably not a cook. Maybe not from that particular—it’s an Asian market so the whole—

01:12:38

Rien Fertel: They’re going to be Chinese or Vietnamese—

01:12:40

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly. And the whole attitude that, “That’s us. That’s my— American western, give me the thing so I can do it right.” As opposed to the “here we all are spirit.” And so I love now because I think there’s so much out, you are more likely in a big Asian supermarket to find something. Maybe it’s going to be written out in English and maybe there are going to be instructions. And there’s going to be a little market here and you can go to a Thai restaurant and say, “What is this thing?” And how many times if somebody comes out of the back and they show you and it’s like, “Take this home. You can make the soup, here. Here.” It’s that incredible generosity, it’s in the food, it’s in the place.

01:13:29

Rien Fertel: You mentioned that you were doing catering too, in New York?

01:13:33

Nancy McDermott: Yes; I would say I flirted with catering because I had been cooking. I was a good cook. I looked around. I taught school and then I started working on weekends for a wholesale bakery and catering company where a friend of mine from UNC was doing the books. And so all of us started freelancing there because being a waiter at a catering job paid really well, so that was this great pickup work. And then it’s like well here’s this wholesale bakery. And they need somebody to pan cakes, stir tomato sauce, and scoop it: completely low skill, nothing really culinary. But I thought that just sort of showed me there’s a food world.

01:14:14

My mother said, “Well, you love to cook, you could major in Home Economics and work in a test kitchen.” And I knew [*Laughs*] it’s like, “Thanks, Mom. I’ll keep that in mind.” That

was worse than teaching school. But it's like, "Oh there's this whole"—I didn't know there was a CIA in culinary and chefs, and that wouldn't have been me anyway, but it was like here's this thing. And in New York, there were all sorts of little, at least at the time, little jobs where somebody has a dinner party for eight people on the Upper West Side and I could illegally in my home kitchen do things and carry stuff over in a cab and I had a lot of friends who wanted short-term immediate work and I could pull off little dinner parties.

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And a Christmas holiday meal at a very small magazine on Madison and forty-something or other, a magazine specializing in batteries for small equipment. There was all that; there was sort of like levels of everything. And I really liked it a lot but the stress of—finally I took like a little weekend learning annex course and it's like, you have to cost it out. So you have to know what one little rolled up sushi slice, what is the exact cost of that, so that you can triple it and then add some more. And charts and it's like my eyes roll back in my head. **[Laughs]** Plus I'd sit down and say I'm going to do a big Thai something or other for your marathon, somebody who has a view of the New York Marathon wants to have a brunch. And so it's like, "Here's what I'm going to do." And they go, "I don't know. I was thinking more along the line of that." And it's like, "Okay." We worked that out and we've done a price and then they say, "Oh, and I want shrimp, instead of that I want shrimp." It's like, "I'll have to get back to you about that." It's like—

01:16:02

Rien Fertel: The price has changed.

01:16:03

Nancy McDermott: Well it certainly should shouldn't it? *[Laughs]*

01:16:06

Rien Fertel: Right.

01:16:06

Nancy McDermott: But that person knew the deal better and I probably said, "Sure!" Because I didn't want to lose the—I was good at one tiny part of it, which is the least of it. So I got married in [19]85 and by then I was not teaching. I was freelancing for the friend who had gotten me the job at the catering company, had a PR company, and so I was writing press kits and just doing freelance work so I could work when I wanted to and not. And so I thought I'll keep doing that on the side and I'll start catering. I'll just dive into catering when we moved to California. And in California it's like, "Oh, my gosh, you have to have a commissary." It was none of this little stuff and that was not a fit anyway. I admitted that I was one of the worst candidates for that *[Laughs]* in the world.

01:16:56

But around that time I took a class at UCLA extension called How to be a Food Writer.

01:17:03

Rien Fertel: Really? Who was teaching that course?

01:17:04

Nancy McDermott: I just saw that. Janice Wald Henderson and she does mostly restaurants and travel. She did a cookbook on white chocolate but she was more writing about chefs, like features for *Bon Appétit* about a certain chef and his dishes—at that time it was mostly his dishes—and not a coming up with recipes like I was. But she had an all-day Saturday thing. There were food editors of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Herald Examiner*, which existed then. There was the food editor from *Bon Appétit*. There was the big restaurant reviewer and there was a cookbook author, so it was like the whole range and everybody bought freelance then.

01:17:48

I came away knowing I want to do newspapers and magazines and write cookbooks and I don't want to be a restaurant reviewer. [**Laughs**] I sort of thought that would be so great and then it's like I quickly realized again not for me.

01:18:02

But there were people, and they didn't talk about how to write about food, but it was how to freelance. So if it's the newspaper write it, double space it, send the whole thing in not stapled, because if they want it they want to run it. They don't want to call you back and talk about it. If it's a magazine you'll never hear from them again. You do a query. You do a cover letter and a query that's going to pitch it and list the things, and they'll call you. So it was how to—

01:18:27

Rien Fertel: Very functional how to—.

01:18:28

Nancy McDermott: Exactly. How to start doing it and sort of what they like about it and book proposal. I was nowhere near ready for that, so I started doing the freelancing for newspapers and magazines mostly about Thai food, started teaching cooking classes because that was something where I knew the ingredients. It was wildly popular all over L.A. but there wasn't that, as far as cooking it, that was a special thing. So that was something that a cooking school is always going to have a market for.

01:18:56

Rien Fertel: Right, right.

01:18:55

Nancy McDermott: And I felt that I should immediately start writing a Thai cookbook because [*snobby voice*] I had lived there and I was me, and this wouldn't be here and I probably wouldn't be here if I had. It took several years of freelancing and teaching cooking classes to get to that point. And that was so good because of course I was standing up in front of actual people who actually wanted to cook the food. And I wanted to zoom through nine recipes, and they would say, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait; which one is lemongrass? Which thing?" It's like I showed them that at the beginning. It's like they want me to—but to realize that the difference between what do people want? What do—and of course, one thing they wanted was my list of the secret Thai restaurants during Q&A. That was it. And one thing that I started to say is the best Thai restaurant is the one that's nearest to your home because you can become a regular there.

01:19:52

And if you just walk in and order these things and say, “That wasn’t good,” I don’t know if it was good or not. But if they have a relationship with you and you get to know them then there’s an, “Oh, my cousin just came from Thailand we have this thing.” It’s a relationship-based culture. And if the great cook’s, who makes the great things, brother comes to town he’s going to go to the airport to pick up his brother, and somebody who is not as good making the dish may not be as good tonight, and that’s just reality. But that was sort of fine dining time and if I show up and the reviewer has said that this is this I expect that what I want should always be available if I go to get it.

01:20:36

So all the little cultural lessons and reality it was just very good for me that by the time I got around to being able to write about it I had gone from a very sort of nervous insecure but entitled place to “How can this work here?” And I’m sure my sympathy for if you can’t get this—when does it matter? Sometimes it matters. You can’t always use—there’s a sauce called *nam pla wan*. *Nam pla* is fish sauce, *wan* is sweet, so it’s sweet fish sauce. It’s a syrup of palm sugar and fish sauce and chilies. It’s cooked to an incredible goo with chili bits in it and maybe spices. And it’s a dip with seafood and sour things, so green mango, which is super-sharp sour, unripe mango, so you dip this really pungent mango into this sweet and salty gooey sauce and it’s just this incredible flavor explosion.

01:21:41

It’s half palm sugar. I wouldn’t do that unless I had palm sugar. That wouldn’t make sense. But if you’re making a curry and you need a tablespoon when you’ve got nineteen other things and it’s adding a little sweetness it’s like, yeah. So I feel like I can help you with those calls and I won’t tell you can make bao with biscuit dough. But you know but she was trying to

help. You know that was not a betraying of the—people who run Thai restaurants here, they're not cultural ambassadors. **[Laughs]** They have a business. **[Laughs]** Some of them have an accounting firm over on the other side of town.

01:22:22

So what we expect—it's like I was in Thailand and I had this and it's not like that and it's like in Thailand just as with here, you can go to a barbecue place and say, "What, no tiramisu?" You know they didn't have a single steamed whatever it was. And in the olden days they didn't have barbecued lamb like they do in Kentucky.

01:22:46

Rien Fertel: Right.

01:22:46

Nancy McDermott: Now the modern barbecue place, I was so frustrated. I went to a new one in Hillsboro and I ordered a barbecue sandwich because my cousin was playing music down there and I wanted to get something to take back. It was a place that didn't serve food. And I got a barbecue sandwich and they brought the bun and the barbecue was on it and I said, "Where's the slaw?" And they said, "Did you order slaw?" And I said, "Well it's a barbecue sandwich."

[Laughs] And I said, "Oh, the chef is not from around here." **[Laughs]** And so I ordered some slaw and I put it on my sandwich and wrapped that thing up. It's like people ought to be able to leave it off but I think it ought to be on there because people who don't know any better won't know that that's a thing and that the bun should be a cheap cottony bun with no nutritional value whatsoever because it's doing a job. It shouldn't be focaccia. It shouldn't have whatever, like the

overly—the ramen where the bowl gets smaller and there’s like too much hard—. And it’s like no, it’s supposed to be that big.

01:23:50

Rien Fertel: So when did you go through the traditional pitch proposal process for this?

01:23:57

Nancy McDermott: Oh yes, yes, and I actually had a friend who was in publishing and he got me an agent. And so I had, let’s see, between the class that I took and *Writer’s Digest Magazine*, and you can Google today how to write a book proposal, and I’ll tell you the three sentences: What is it? Who cares? Why you? **[Laughs]** It said all of that and that’s still true; even if you have a blog with 400 gazillion followers, there’s still you know there’s still that thing. So she actually sold it to a New York publisher but that person went out on maternity leave and had a meeting and they hadn't read the proposal and I just got my feelings hurt and with criticizing my proposal. “How dare they? I am me.” Again that thin skin, that ego, whatever was still there and looking back they were good points. But I had a friend who was ill and it was just sort of a time where I just said, “I’m not going to do it.”

01:25:03

I paid them back and didn’t do it. And then a year went by and my agent sent it to Chronicle Books and said they’d like to do it and I said, “Oh, whatever.” **[Laughs]** I already did the proposal. And it’s perfect because it came out at a time—it cost \$9.95 and it’s got a pretty cover and it came out the same time as *The Beautiful Cookbook Series*, which are these gigantic coffee table books. It was a series that Weldon Owen Publishers did. They cost \$50 or

something. And it got reviewed because a lot of newspapers especially said, “Two new books out about the food of Thailand. One is da, da, da, da, da, and the other is da, da, da, da, da.” And this is arranged by region and there are no pictures and of course a lot of people said, “Well, I want the \$50 one but a lot of people said, it’s a why-not price. I was crushed that it didn’t have photos or whatever. But that turned out to be a good thing. And so I wrote about Asian food for how many years?

01:26:10

Rien Fertel: I mean you became one of the authorities in America on Southeast Asian cuisine, right?

01:26:13

Nancy McDermott: Yes.

01:26:15

Rien Fertel: Even Chinese—so how did that feel? I mean were you surprised? Were you—?

Nancy McDermott:

01:26:23

It felt good. I mean it’s like this is the work I want to do and this lets me keep going with all of that. It felt great. I mean still to walk into a bookstore and to see that book there is awesome and I’m still finding out new things. And the more of a ticket that I had, the more when I’m freelancing, and it’s like, okay, you can write about this or that. The writing about southern food

is because it would never have occurred to me to do that. I mean we lived in southern California. We were there fifteen years when we moved back here in 1999.

01:27:08

Rien Fertel: 1999, you moved back here?

01:27:09

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, and again we got married in [19]85 and moved to southern California and moved back here in 1999. Will did a post doc at UC Irvine for like four and a half years and then he went with a bio-tech company in San Diego. So we moved down to Carlsbad, which is like twenty-five miles north of San Diego.

01:27:28

And within, let's see, while we were in Irvine we were fifteen minutes from Little Saigon, the Garden Grove on Westminster and again that was another thing that I could get anything. Of course I could get lemongrass and galangal in New York and go to a few Thai restaurants, but Little Saigon was "Here's the Chinese." They're making the ducks and the pigs and all the Chinese barbecue stuff. There are lots of those places. And here's a little Vietnamese family run shop and here's a Khmer one and here's also Middle Eastern places and noodle shops that that showcase this particular dish that I love or that I've never heard of. Food of Vietnam that is magnificent and shopping malls and things in English, the 99 Ranch Market was the first Asian supermarket that I had been to and so I was able to go much deeper. So in terms of teaching cooking classes and writing and so forth I I did market tours, like here's how to sort of find your way around all that. So that really solidified my knowledge and deepened it and there

is a Thai Temple in West Hollywood, in Los Angeles, and I would go up there and I had friends who taught a fruit and vegetable carving class, which I just went to hang out. **[Laughs]** It's like, "Please don't hold the knives. You have no talent in that. But let's talk about whatever."

01:29:00

So being able to keep up with all that was really key.

01:29:06

Rien Fertel: Were you also traveling back? Were you revisiting?

01:29:08

Nancy McDermott: No, no. When I got the contract to write the book in [19]89—so got married in [19]85 and moved and took that class probably [19]86—got the contract in [19]89, I said I have to go because I had hardly been to the south of Thailand. I mean just one beach trip to Hua Hin and here's like I'm going to do a regional book? So again that's the promise and then fulfill the promise.

01:29:32

But that was the only trip. And that time I went I got a notepad and went around and had an agenda. And showed up in my town; I had not kept in touch very well. But my students were all like out of college. Many of them were teachers. And I found one student who—and there weren't cell phones—who gathered people together and they all took the day off from their schools where they were teachers or whatever, and many of them had like Toyota trucks, and so we got a convoy, and they said, "You want to know about Thai food? Okay!" So they took me around. I remember zooming down the road going somewhere to eat some particular regional

thing and all of the sudden there's a stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop: everybody pulls over. We're passing an area where there were like ten or twelve little sort of shelter from the sun places where people were selling what's called *khao lam*, so it's a hunk of bamboo about a foot long and it's filled with sweet sticky rice and black beans and coconut milk. It's a sweet. And so that is soaked and mixed up and packed into this bamboo and then it's slow cooked over coals.

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So you whack it up, pull it off, and then eat this sweet rice out from it. And so I remember we stopped and it's like, oh good, we're going to get that. And people started to get out and it's like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, the one with the blue flag." And I remember it's like, oh, it's not just that; my students, who were just random, they were little foodies per se, but they cared—somebody knew we go to this one. And to me that is so typical in Thailand. It's typical among southerners. It's not so typical—that's not true everywhere. I mean some people care more about stuff like that. So I like being in places where that's less odd. **[Laughs]**

01:31:39

And you might argue about it but it's not odd to not see that these two things, they may look the same but this one was smoked over such and such **[Laughs]** and such and such or she gets the rice from such and such a place, the competition.

01:31:55

Rien Fertel: Better, so much—

01:31:56

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, just deeply better. **[Laughs]** But so they took me around and I ended up staying three months, and I only came home because I told my husband I was going to come back, because I was not finished but it's just like, "Okay, I'm just going to go home and regroup and—."

01:32:15

One thing that I remember is I felt like I have to go to everywhere and see the thing in the one place. And I would be at the big market in Bangkok, and I'm just walking along looking for thing one, and I just noticed this thing and it's a tiny stall dedicated to the particular noodle dish of the tiny province in the Muslim part of the southernmost Thailand. It's right there. And I go in and I talk to the woman and—

01:32:43

Rien Fertel: So you don't have to actually—

01:32:44

Nancy McDermott: I didn't have to go to that place. **[Laughs]** That happened a lot.

01:32:49

Rien Fertel: What was the specialty in Surin, where you lived, if there was one? Was there something—?

01:32:55

Nancy McDermott: There wasn't one. Let's see, Surin is famous for the elephant roundup. It's like this big tourist thing that happens.

01:33:02

Rien Fertel: Where people still go?

01:33:03

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, oh yeah, yeah, I mean it's like the ACC tournament. It's an international of foreign tourists come, people from all over Thailand come. It's this sort of circusy thing that's been going on a long time. And so if you say to ordinary people in Thailand I was in Surin it's like, "Oh. How were the elephants? Did you have a pet elephant?" [***Ironic Laugh***] That's what it's known for.

01:33:26

It's because it's Khmer and it's sort of country food. There's not really a specialty that where I would have said this is the one thing. Most of the food of the Northeast is Laotian and is sticky rice and green papaya salad and the grilled garlic chicken like that you get at the bus stations. But of course for Thai people that's like saying hotdogs. It's appreciated but it would be more like within the region, regional differences. And Cambodian food is milder than Thai. Thai and sort of I'd say that Northeastern Lao are the spiciest, the very intense and southern.

01:34:12

Khmer, Cambodian, and Northern Thai, they're highly spiced but a little milder, not so much chili heat. One of my least favorite things people saying, "This is the national dish of." And it's like, "What is?" [***Laughs***] It's like do you sing the National Anthem before you do it?

It's like picking one thing and yet what do you say? What are the southern dishes? What quintessential whatever? And I like to, just as a writer, I like to stay away from sort of "this more than this." So there's got to be a chapter on coconut cake and a chapter on pound cakes and a chapter on chocolate cakes, even though that's the thinnest. There's not a tradition of chocolate bars and that seemed sort of almost French, but everybody had the Hershey's cocoa can with a little metal top that got rusty and so when I see it's like, oh, Dutch-processed cocoa, I think my grandmother would have used Hershey's cocoa. That would have been the thing.

01:35:22

My mother was a big daughter of a dairy farmer. I never had butter until I was probably nineteen because margarine was cheap. And for making cakes it's always room temperature *[Laughs]*. Just the sort of thinking back. I have a great fondness for evaporated milk. It's huge in Thailand and it's the only milk that you could get. Now my grandmother certainly—she was on a dairy farm and she had milk—but for cooking and baking I think southerners in US recipes that say Pet Milk, and you'll talk about sweet milk and buttermilk. Well sweet milk you drink. And it's like buttermilk in the cooking and in the buttermilk and cornbread thing. But I just love thinking about what was the pantry? What were the universe of things that people had to use, both in Thailand and in the American South? And it's limited in terms of some shelf stable things, and there's a whole lot of over and over and over again with the same stuff, much of which is common.

01:36:26

I mean limes and doing the *Quick and Easy* Asian books, which I did after I was actually living here already, when I did most of those—

01:36:36

Rien Fertel: And that was Thai, Vietnamese—

01:36:38

Nancy McDermott: And Chinese.

01:36:39

Rien Fertel: —and Chinese, right.

01:36:41

Nancy McDermott: And I said, okay, for *Quick and Easy* it's going to be things that you can get at a good Harris Teeter, which is I don't know what the equivalent. Food Lion is more of an everyday inexpensive, so they're going to have fabulous cornmeal and syrups and whole beans, a lot of homey things are going to be excellent there, but they're not going to have—now they have coconut milk and I don't know if they have fish sauce or not. They have soy sauce and bad Chow Mein noodles. But thinking about—I don't think I used to tamarind at all because you'd have to go to an Asian market for that.

01:37:18

And so I'm saying what could you make on a week night when you don't have—maybe I made an exception or two like, well I didn't put a fried spring roll recipe in here, but I put, in the *Quick and Easy Thai*, the Vietnamese spring roll because you can get those the rice paper rounds. Things that are shelf stable once they come in they're there forever.

01:37:43

Rien Fertel: Right, right.

01:37:43

Nancy McDermott: Who is using all the ginger? Fresh ginger is everywhere. And yet when I write about it just on my blog or something it's like people can be intimidated about that. It's like I see it but that's not—

01:37:55

Rien Fertel: It's still foreign.

01:37:55

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly. I don't know what to do with it. how would I get the skin off and if I did—. So I feel like in cookbooks that's a way to say, "Look at this. You can do this." It's sort of hand-holding, introducing, building a comfort level so that people—. Some people come by that naturally. People often say, "I love your book. Of course I don't use recipes." I just say, "Wow!" because I love recipes. **[Laughs]** I've always been looking at it. To me that's like how do I get to Wilmington? Well, I could figure it out, but I like knowing that I should go east on Interstate 40. To me that doesn't stop me from pulling off to the side. It's kind of a guide, but it's not "Don't leave it in there for thirty-five minutes," just because I said it. If I said twenty-five to thirty-five I want you to start checking here, so—. **[Laughs]**

01:38:50

Rien Fertel: Right. I have to ask, did you ever receive any sort of backlash from media or people because for producing Southeast Asian cookbooks, and despite having lived there for years, not being of that ethnicity or nationality?

01:39:10

Nancy McDermott: Actually I'd say to this day, not directly, but that conversation, as soon as that started, I felt very conflicted about it because it's like they're absolutely right. I mean you can't—

01:39:27

Rien Fertel: Right. I mean it happens more now I think than in 1990 or something when—

01:39:30

Nancy McDermott: Yeah. It occurred to me and I felt like—and one thing that I said to myself and anything that was ever where I had a choice about it I would say, “I fell in love with Thai food during my few years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand.” That's the cocktail party thing. And that gives people, then, I think a comfort level. You might know what you're talking about.

01:39:54

I think a lot of people don't care. And that can be a misconception. The idea that any southerner can tell you about southern food in a deep meaningful way, a lot of people don't care. I mean my sister doesn't care. **[Laughs]** My younger sister, it's like it's not of interest. She likes this, she likes that. But that's sort of not her thing. And so I thought Julia Child writes about

French food. And I'm in the "come-on-in guide, help you get started so you feel comfortable." And there's Jacques Pépin and French restaurants in town, in French and Italian, some extent, but that's not true with every cuisine. And it's bothered me. I decided for me it's, "Can someone else whose food it is succeed?" And that's often not true. I mean for Mexican food there's one person that most people who watch PBS, it's been like thirty years. That's not—

01:41:16

Rien Fertel: I know that guy.

01:41:16

Nancy McDermott: Yeah. That guy and he's the one to go to. My friend Victoria Bouloubasis writes so wonderfully about food and culture, and she did a piece a few months ago about going with a young friend, a guy who grew up in probably in North Carolina, born in the states and grew up in the states. His mom is a great cook. But he grew up here. And he has a Mexican restaurant or food truck or something, and she and he went to visit their friend who has a Mexican place in Raleigh that is not one that would be recommended to you as, "Oh, it's authentic. It's so this or that." It's got a drive-thru and it's got combination plates and so forth. But they went and they sat inside and they ordered the things that were absolutely wonderful that this guy loves to do, that he knows about. But it's a business and this is what he business is for.

01:42:11

So you got to make a living, and people love combination plates and people who go to a Thai restaurant they want Pad Thai. And they want satay and they want that and if they get sticky rice they want it to be hot, which in Thailand it would never be hot. You can't pick it up when

it's hot. So it comes out wrapped in plastic, steaming, and it's like in Thailand there's a special teak tray that you spread it out on and fan it, to bring it to room temperature, so you can roll it up into a ball, and it will sit in the middle of the table. But between food safety and perception—the chopsticks that we're going up here with—because we seize on that thing and then we have rules about, “Well they're not authentic.” So someone who is still traveling down to the place to go to the tiny place where they still grow the magical chili and do that, hooray, love that being lifted up.

01:43:06

But that doesn't mean that the person here, who grew up in America and is using jalapeños for something, it's like that's not watering down. That's not gentrifying. It's like we're so mad about the wrong things in my opinion. And I don't want to push that part of my work because I've got something to say, but how come I could go get a book tomorrow and somebody who knows just as much doesn't have a platform or comfort level. Or people's perception that I'm a big exploding carousel of something, I'm a personality, and yet there's so much from folks over here who could do it, and so thinking how can I sort of get the mic and hand it over? That's something I've been thinking a lot about.

01:44:09

Rien Fertel: Okay.

01:44:10

Nancy McDermott: And so not putting new projects out about that. It's not something that came up a lot. I think people who like me say is, “I got your book and I made this thing and it

was really good and we had a good time.” It’s like that’s sort of my favorite thing. But I love the ways that people can go deep and that the people whose food it is, that’s when I’m for listen to *Racist Sandwich* and stop arguing. **[Laughs]**

01:44:47

Rien Fertel: The podcast?

01:44:47

Nancy McDermott: Yeah. They’re completely on it and the sad thing is that people say, “Oh, I hear it and people are there’s so many excellent, beautiful things that have been written about it and what was wrong with “pho is the new ramen,” and then here’s this guy in Philadelphia, who looks like me, who’s going to scold you about putting hot sauce in it and this new way that he’s learned to get more noodles on the chopstick and it’s like, “What? What is wrong—” **[Laughs]** “—with this?” And yet, those folks are giving what we’ve said we wanted. In a way people do want to know what’s the new hot thing. And so how do I be part of not that but, “Look at this. Isn't this amazing?”

01:45:42

So these two guys, who are from Mexican culture but they’re here, they’re Mexican, it is authentic for them to do this here, which is different from me doing it. It’s different from me saying, “Oh, I’m uplifting,” or that sort of obnoxious make-it-better-because-they-weren’t-doing-it-right. But they’re not allowed to change it from what the anthropology-oriented person says. It’s like what’s our intention? I think that bothers me.

01:46:10

But people read it or hear it and then say, “Well I guess I can't take enchiladas to the potluck.” But it's like no one said that. How can I be part of clarifying what that means and saying, “Why don't we know of a name of someone?” Why when we say Thai food; somebody would say me before—that's changing, that's changing some. There's two wonderful books that came out this year, but that's pretty slow. And there needs to be intention. There needs to be awareness. There needs to be, when the ten chefs get picked, they need to say who else was picked and then say I don't want to be in this picture. We're missing it. “Here's my friend.” How do we make it, because it's better? It's so much more and it shouldn't be consolidating the thing here. It's like how do we get more stories?

01:47:17

Rien Fertel: And I follow you on Twitter and you do have this public persona on Twitter, and I guess on other social media platforms, I'm guessing like Facebook, where you do promote—if everyone has a kind of social media identity, right, that they're kind of performing or that's real or whatever, yours is super-progressive and, well I don't know, I don't want to define it for you, but I would define it as progressive and liberal and with a very intent focus on race and ethnicity and adding your voice to that conversation, but also doing a lot of retweeting the voices and the conversation that need to matter, who have been silenced forever.

01:48:05

I don't know what my question is but, well maybe I could build a question out of that by asking my last question in a different way, because now you're known as kind of a southern cookbook writer, and I'm sure there's people on social media who follow you because of that or

only know you because of *Southern Cakes*, *Southern Pies*, and other kind of southern recipes and southern cookbooks.

01:48:33

Do you ever get a backlash from that side, a more conservative side, who don't know your persona as—I don't know what I'm asking, but do you ever get shamed for being too vocal on Twitter, I guess is what I'm asking?

01:49:02

Nancy McDermott: I'd say not much because I think I've been doing it a long time and—

01:49:08

Rien Fertel: I don't know if it was new or if it was—

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Nancy McDermott: Not really. Like on Facebook I've been doing this for—if anybody follows me for three days they know. And something will come up once in a while and they're gone from my page. I will occasionally engage if it seems like a respectful question and there seems somewhere to go, there have been times where I've done a back and forth or two and said, nah. And there have been times where I've done a back and forth or two and it really was a question or something but I guess I've always felt like it's my page. And I feel the side-tracking, the derailling and taking something over here and about that, it's like that doesn't serve anybody. So I try to avoid that.

01:50:03

I do have two Twitter accounts [*Laughs*] and this is me, I'm pretty inconsistent. I've had Nancy Mac forever, and that's just me, and a couple years ago, well maybe a year and a half ago, I started working on my blog by doing something called posting [*Laughs*], which I didn't do very often.

01:50:24

Rien Fertel: Updating.

01:50:25

Nancy McDermott: That's right. Actually putting recipes up there and it's a place you could come and see something new. And I named it Nancy's Table, so I did a Nancy's Table Twitter account, which is small, and the idea is that that's just going to be food. But I can't help it.

[*Laughs*] It was going to be just food completely and I'm certainly more out there, I try to sort of be over here and it's more a matter of sort of actively let that be about food. I've been thinking it hasn't really—I don't know—I figure it doesn't hurt anything to have both of them, but I feel like I want people to know that. And if that scares somebody away or I lose them it's like, "Good." That saves both of us a lot of time and trouble, because I see a lot of value in putting something out there, and even when it's an angry back and forth, or a spirited back and forth, people aren't going to like it, I'm not going to change someone who is coming here with these talking points, but to respond. It's important to me for us to say, "White supremacy, yeah, it's real. It's not true but it's real." Why are we wasting time on this?

01:51:51

I just think about that all the time: how can I be part of waking up whatever? There's so many people that are—the lives are so affected. They've been going so long, they're so thoughtful, they're so quick; we've seen it. There are people who, if they knew, if they had any idea, they would not be part of it. We're seeing that now with the gun. There's nothing new that's being said about it. But suddenly people who didn't get it before are taking that thing to the police station and saying, "I can't be part of this."

01:52:35

I've gotten like I wouldn't even go back and forth. Now things are so bad, I don't have time. I don't have time. I can't imagine that it's—**[Sighs]** But when we say food is—and we say in the SFA—food is part of this. We can gather around the table—we can't just gather around the table. How can serving food and—Tunde Wey is all over this. Or for me, I always wanted to have a—this isn't about cookbooks—I go to a lefty liberal church. That's something we started when our younger daughter was four. It's like I miss the good parts of church. I want there to be choir and a Christmas pageant and it's about feeding hungry people and that sort of lefty Catholics. There's a lot good there and the social justice thing, that's something that I have found places that are open and affirming. And it's like, well, "How can homophobia—" It's just if you actually read things it's terrifying how—.

01:53:53

So even in my lefty liberal church, even in Chapel Hill, where we say **[pats back]** we whatever, the misplacedness of, "We're liberal, we listen to NPR, we would never do that." But that landfill, unfortunately we're going to have put the waste transfer station right next to the landfill even though it's like, "Gosh, that's just too bad." **[Laughs]** And not wanting being very

offended when it is suggested that that's maybe environmental injustice and maybe there's something bigger. Why are all the roads that cut through cutting off Durham? You know all this.

01:54:30

But I thought I would like to have events and call them s-u-a-l, I wish that spelled something: Shut Up and Listen. And no one is allowed to make any comments. And just have people talk. And afterwards when those people—you can gather and talk among yourselves but the clueless, stupid waste of time, keeping you from getting—because you can just hear them forming. It's like, how do we get through? How do we jump to? And I'd say I'm very encouraged. Especially Twitter, where truth can flow through and people way smarter than me—I'm not good at it. I can't think what to say but I just love it. It's like, "Yeah that's it! That, that, that." But I feel like that's something that I can do. And because the stakes are so high, and how would we get people to see that when it's not their thing? So now when I realize this is going to happen to my kid at a very nice school, I'm so glad for all that's happening. How do we—it's so built-in.

01:55:59

Did you read Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*?

01:56:07

Rien Fertel: No, I didn't read the second one, no.

01:56:09

Nancy McDermott: That's really important. It's it's not great—

01:56:12

Rien Fertel: I think I was scared to, because of the immediate media attention and book reviews and everything else. I bought a copy and I just could not—

01:56:18

Nancy McDermott: I highly recommend it. It's flawed. It's her first thing and then she went on and did the other thing. But the answer is right there. The answer is right there.

01:56:28

Rien Fertel: Huh, okay.

01:56:29

Nancy McDermott: And she doesn't even see it. And it's interesting that the New York editor said, "Let's take this part and I'm very troubled by *To Kill a Mockingbird* at this wonderful thing because he dies." Tom Robinson dies. He realizes he's going to spend his life in prison and he would just rather be gone than have his kids grow up coming to visit him and it's like, well, we walked in his shoes. It's like, how far did you walk? [**Laughs**] Did you walk over the actual coals? Or did you wear the heat-proof ones?

01:57:02

But her father and bachelor uncle, who actually slaps her across the face when she doesn't get it, say, "Yes." The screaming racist yahoo who came into the church this afternoon and fired everybody up, it's like of course he's an idiot. But that's what we have to do. We have to sort of throw bloody meat to those folks or else all this won't be here most likely.

01:57:38

And she realizes—she accepted that. So and I said, “That’s it right there; that’s the whole—oh, I don’t believe in that part but he’s this part.” So how does the food—how can we do—?

01:57:59

Rien Fertel: I mean does food offer a way out at all? People nowadays seem to think it does. I also think it’s healthy to be skeptical of that.

01:58:07

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, I’m skeptical of it. For me to do it I would have to have the courage to—we have to get people to sign up to be uncomfortable. So I’m serious about Shut Up and Listen. I’m serious, because there’s not a reconciliation. There’s not a back and forth in both sides and all that.

01:58:34

We are allergic to being uncomfortable and we are allergic to being seen as part of the problem and we want to be personal: “I’m me.” I do, too. But that’s wanting a cookie. And if we have to have that, if *we* have to have that, I think they have a right to be angry. And they’re right and they’ve been screaming and yelling and speaking and writing. It’s in every form, it’s everywhere. So between the Me Too Movement and the Never Again Movement, where suddenly it can crack open and truth can at least be part of it. The resistance is huge and I don’t know which way it’s going to go yet. I had a very disturbing thing recently. I was at an event where people were talking about food people who’ve been horrible, predatory, and it’s like, “But

I'd be crazy not to use him. But he's an incredible resource of mine." And it's like, "Oh, it's not even fifteen minutes." And sort of like, I don't want to lose this and it's like, if you're personal friends and you want to be personal friends, okay, but there should be a cost forever.

02:00:11

When Coretta Scott King tells us that someone is bad, we should believe her and not let them be Attorney General of the United States. To just finally out with it, all the history of sheriffs. **[Laughs]** So I see food as, if we serve food people will come. So I actually belong to a Baptist Church. It's a liberal—it's an American Baptist Church, and famous for—they formed when Dr. King couldn't speak at the First Baptist Church downtown, and a little too much proud of ourselves but—I forgot where I was going—.

02:00:57

Rien Fertel: Well you said just feed people—

02:01:01

Nancy McDermott: Yes. So when our kids were little and we wanted to have like a sort of parents resource group—conservative churches have Wednesday night supper, and people come and there's a short worship service and there's a meal served, and I realized we went on Wednesday nights and of course the church wanted us to go. We went partly because there would be meatloaf and green beans. My mother wouldn't have to cook. **[Laughs]** My father had choir practice afterwards. And so I got very clear that if you want people to come to your event for church, for school, for whatever it is, serve food and later have childcare, and that will greatly

up—because there were a lot of people who would want to come where that will make a difference.

02:01:43

So if we have the wonderful food and the fun but the price of admission and being part of that is that we're going to make progress, or else there's no point. And that if people buy into that—I've actually been thinking maybe do a Facebook group or something—I don't know—but I think serving food and having food and we're going to be there and some of it needs to be all white people because black people don't need to sit through people saying incredibly stupid clueless things. Because we have to emote, we have to comment. It's like how could they all be wrong? How could we not care? It's not that they have to have the talk. It's that the talk isn't enough.

02:02:41

Nancy McDermott: What did Tamir Rice do that the talk would help? And we need to see that complicity, and I'm here to grant amnesty for—if you didn't see it before and you see it now let's get started. I would like everybody think of some ways we can make up for, but somebody is paying a price, so there's so much. But I'm not good at the details of it, but I think serving food is [*Laughs*]—good.

02:03:17

Rien Fertel: It is. It's a way in. Yeah.

02:03:19

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly. And but not we're going to serve food—there has to be an intention. There has to be curriculum. There has to be something and that people—they're free to leave, they're free to pull back and think it's not right. So somebody can come on my page and leave it. *[Laughs]* And they can send me a DM and say I'm full of shit but they can't leave a mean thing there because that's not all—. So I feel like books and cooking and—I feel like just people cooking and people gathering with their own whatever that's a really good start. That's the sort of the good impulses. That's we're in a place. There's nothing wrong with that.

02:04:14

And extending that to everybody is all it would take. If we've been not allowed to identify, so white women don't identify with a black woman whose child was taken. How can we possibly miss that? But it's like, I'll tell you how, because we did: this and this and this, and the subliminal level of it. I heard yesterday this was a tweet, "I'm in medical school and yesterday Professor asks, 'How many of you have been mistaken for a lab tech or a nurse versus a physician?'"

02:05:04

Rien Fertel: Oh, I think I saw that also, right. And it was an all black audience, right?

02:05:07

Nancy McDermott: No, no. It was a room of medical students, and let's say there were seven people of color, or twelve women and four people of color, who might have been male or female. All those people raised their hands and none of the white men.

02:05:22

Rien Fertel: Right, right, okay.

02:05:25

Nancy McDermott: And I thought, that's it; that's it right there. That's it. And the fact that you don't mean to—and I could do it. I messed up. There's a joke about the doctor comes in and says such and such and says, "No, I can't operate. That's my daughter," or there's something. I missed it. The trick was the doctor was female. And I'm not talking about when I was twenty-four; I'm talking like five years ago. So it's like, wow, the water is infected. [*Laughs*]

02:06:03

Rien Fertel: Yeah, because the world wants to see the rest of the world in the way it wants to see it, and it's because it's been seen that way forever.

02:06:13

Nancy McDermott: Right. And but it's intentional. It was—

02:06:16

Rien Fertel: Very intentional.

02:06:17

Nancy McDermott: —there is a big machine. There are people who want that and I don't care if they deep down know it's not true and are using a—it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if

somebody really thinks somebody is inferior or not. If you act like it or allow other people to act like it, it really doesn't help. If I'm hungry it doesn't help that you didn't give me the food because you think I'll buy drugs or because you think I'm lazy or whatever. It's like I need the food. Give me the food.

02:06:48

Rien Fertel: Right.

02:06:49

Nancy McDermott: *[Laughs]* So seeing it—see it, say it, stop it. Just seeing that and realizing my generation is probably going to walk in that. And then we catch ourselves and we see it's like, oh my god, oh I did that again. It's like, yeah, but you get it and you're not saying but I remember—. That's intentional and then we could work on the machine that keeps putting that out there, because it was very intentional, and I'd say there is this much that is intentional. The people who make those weapons, they don't care and they want to sell them and they benefit from it.

02:07:30

And so they're going to do whatever it takes and people who want control over us know that giving us a bad guy, a bad gal, a bad place, that's all it takes. Which is the thing about, at least I'm not black. That's the goodie that was given that's still out there with these folks in the hats. And if we could see it, that emperor's new clothes thing, then that would undermine it.

02:08:03

Rien Fertel: Yeah. We've been talking for two hours. I guess we could wrap it up. I know you have something to do this afternoon.

02:08:14

Nancy McDermott: Oh my god. *[Laughs]* I went way off the cookbook line and I am so—

02:08:16

Rien Fertel: And I think that's okay. I think we don't need to talk about cookbooks anymore. I guess what do you see as—because you do have a career as a southern food writer, as a cookbook writer, you've had for a long time—what do you see or what do you hope for the future? And this is what you know we're both—we're sitting down talking as Southern Foodways Alliance members, recording an oral history for the Southern Foodways Alliance and part of their mission is addressing this in some way. But whether you want to pick up on that mission or not, what do you see as good work that is being done or should be done, whether in writing or in activism, but couched in food, in the food world in the South?

02:09:08

Nancy McDermott: The oral histories are huge, and I think of Mr. Ed [Scott]—Mr. Catfish, the guy in Mississippi who had a catfish—don't remember his name.

02:09:20

Rien Fertel: Oh yeah. No, I forget too.

02:09:23

Nancy McDermott: But he did it. He started the business and he succeeded, and they would not let him—. This is the huge—

02:09:29

Rien Fertel: They wouldn't let him work?

02:09:34

Nancy McDermott: They wouldn't let him process his catfish at the place because then he would have been—it would have been clear that he wasn't—they're not incapable of doing it. So they thought they could shut him down by that. So he started his own and became the owner of a business.

02:09:55

So that's recorded, it's all out there. It's just that we don't see it, hear it, it doesn't get covered. When the movie *Selma* came out there was this big moralistic outcry that Lyndon Johnson wasn't portrayed correctly by Hollywood people whose agenda of always portraying historical figures is what? I mean Frederick Douglas was not included in *Lincoln*, the *Lincoln* movie, which was wonderful. And they had Seward. But Frederick Douglas was left out. It's like we just don't have enough screen time. It's like Morgan Freeman is alive. Morgan Freeman or Samuel L. Jackson. They left that out.

02:10:47

Okay, so it was historical but sometimes you can't do everything or—the idea that Lyndon Johnson wasn't a complete champion, so *Selma* was immediately mired in that. And I know—

02:11:05

Rien Fertel: Right instead of talking about what it's about.

02:11:08

Nancy McDermott: Yes it was so magnificent. I mean how many people haven't seen that? People are going to *Black Panther* because it's like, yay, it's fun, it's awesome. But so much is right out there and yet it doesn't get seen.

02:11:23

And Black Lives Matter, I remember it was like on—I get my news from Twitter. I can't even listen—NPR is like the worst because they should know better, so when things are framed and just all the attention given and so forth it's like I can't be around—. I was at an event with a dear friend and we shared a room and she puts morning news on and I felt like, well it's her room too. And I said, “No, like I can't hear the voice. I can't.” She said, “Yeah, it's a particularly bad day. And I said, “They're all particularly bad days.” So I look on Twitter.

02:11:59

And again gone—

02:12:06

Rien Fertel: Well, the food world—?

02:12:08

Nancy McDermott: So getting those stories and putting them out there: *Gravy*, the movement, things like the movie about the computers, the space—the African American women who were the space people—so creating stories that tell those stories is an archive. Lifting that up. Lifting up chefs, because the chef world is very powerful. So Eduardo [Jordan] in Seattle, it's like I met him. He was at SFA. It's like, oh now he's on my radar screen. And so lifting up, passing the microphone and doing that. The Birmingham event has been very powerful. I couldn't go this year but I went two years, and Rosalyn Bentley spoke and there's a woman who—oh what's her name? It starts with a V [Valerie Boyd]. She's a professor in the journalism in Athens—anyway an African American newspaper journalist.

02:13:23

So getting people to speak, I wish we could be more direct with that and just maybe say this is what we're going to talk—sign up for this. [*Laughs*] There's more of a Shut Up and Listen.

02:13:38

Rien Fertel: I think Shut Up and Listen is—

02:13:41

Nancy McDermott: No Q&A, because something very influential to me was a class that Tim Tyson, who is a historian, he's at Duke, and he's in the Center for Documentary Studies—

02:13:55

Rien Fertel: And he just wrote a book about Emmett Till?

02:13:56

Nancy McDermott: Yes, exactly. And actually when that book came out I was not crazy about the first thing on that book, but so he's from Oxford, North Carolina and he wrote a book called *Blood Doesn't Sign My Name*, which you may be familiar with. And he's ten years old and is in town when there's a shooting, lynching of a Vietnam Veteran, and just the whole outcry about that.

02:14:20

There was a movie made about it that was not quite as primetime as it could have been but an amazing story. But he did a college class that you could take. It was taught for Carolina, Duke, North Carolina Central, graduate and undergraduate credit, and then community members could come.

02:14:44

And it was held at Hayti Heritage Center, which is an African American church that was deconsecrated and made into an art center. It's in Durham, it's right next to the freeway that cuts the African American community, that goes from North Durham to South Durham, one of those. And it was like I have magic powers. I can tell you that in every town of any size there's going to be—in High Point it's like Kivett Drive that goes around, and Washington Street the black business district—just boarded up dead. It's like was that their intention? I don't know. It doesn't matter. Systemically the intention was to benefit this group that this group can't be in. So my

liberal church gets mad when you say that this decision was because one of our members was on that Board and he is not a racist and it's like, it's not about that. It's the systemic, that's the thing.

02:15:41

It's not about me going to your house and calling your dad out for something he did or didn't do, whatever. It's there's a royal *we* of the system that we can all say, "Oh my god, I had no idea Charlie Rose was doing such horrible things." He's gone. **[Laughs]** And that he's not the only one. If I'm speeding and they stop me, and I say somebody passed me doing ninety-five, they don't care. You still get a ticket. It's how it should be. **[Laughs]** I shouldn't be speeding.

02:16:21

Rien Fertel: Let me ask you one more question.

02:16:22

Nancy McDermott: Yes.

02:16:24

Rien Fertel: And what do you see as the common thread that, if you see one, runs through your writing career, through your book career?

02:16:33

Nancy McDermott: The similarity between the books—so when I started—I have probably spent longer writing about Asian food than I did—the southern is like the new thing. I'd say most

people who know me in southern food don't really know about this. Long before and not just for cultural sensitivity, it's just I haven't gone back to Thailand. So I've done more of that.

02:17:02

And people said, "Wow, that's so different." First of all because they thought I was a pastry chef, which I'm not. And I said, I know, it's just I write about what I'm interested in. You're right. That's kind of amazing. And I was amazed for about forty minutes. And then pretty quickly I thought you know what? It's the books are the same because I'm interested in the food and who cooks it, and if it doesn't have a story I'm not interested in it.

02:17:28

So I love to go eat out at all the restaurants but if I go to Lantern and I have Andrea's wonderful food it's fantastic, but I don't want to make those dishes even though they were yummy. I want to get a book of old things or I'm crazy about momos, which are Nepalese dumpling. It's a word for sort of all the dumplings, and they're Asian, they're Chinese in origin, but they are in Nepal and that part of South Asia.

02:18:02

So what is it, who cooks it, why, and what's their story? I want them to talk about it. So I'm interested in the people and the stories behind the food. That's it. So I'm always looking back. I'm not good at thinking up a new—it never occurs—it's like, oh shit, I could totally have benefitted from this trend. But it never [*Laughs*]*—*it never occurred to me because I'm interested in what people do and why they do it. Even if I don't like the food, even if it's not delicious to me, it's very precious to me that this woman in Taiwan is still making this jelly stuff and selling it out of the back of the truck, and she's on Facebook now, and she drives around the neighborhoods of Taipei. She's third generation. Her grandmother did it at home. Her mother

had a shop. Her mother took it to the markets, and now she has to drive around because there's not that much call for it. But she goes to the parks, where the old folks go and they do tai chi or ballroom dancing or something, and it's seven o'clock in the morning, she's at a different park because it's sort of a shelf-stable thing.

02:19:15

And she's got Facebook and Twitter and all of that and she's about twenty-four. It's not something that you or I would be interested in, but for those old people it's sweet. And so to me that's an incredible food story but not because we want to eat it or that we can make it at home.

02:19:36

So here's the thing, if people could see the person right there doing that thing and then say, "Wait, what," we would do the right thing. But we've been taught, we've been very carefully instructed, not to see, and we're so locked into seeing the clutch your purse, all of that, it's baked in so deeply. And I think the reason it succeeds is because you can visibly, very far away, see if someone is brown or white. At a scary distance you can at least make a good guess. And the other group is women. People can keep it going by poisoning us and it's like, blah, blah, blah. A history teacher that my daughter had at the local fancy high school didn't want to hear her talking about the landfill and da, da, da, because he said, "Well, I'm Irish, and my relatives were 'no dogs or Irish need apply.' " And it's like, yeah and how's that working for you now. *[Laughs]* Because you can disappear.

02:20:55

And so to look at that and just shut out the—my relatives worked hard and just see that you couldn't have a job. An incredibly sad moment was going to Toni Tipton Martin's Soul Summit two years ago—three years ago, in Austin, and we had a ghost restaurant tour. Which

was walking around what had been. It didn't really seem like an African-American neighborhood anymore. But we went to sites. Usually there was no building left. Usually it's like here's a you know medium-rise apartment or here is a mini-mart or something. Occasionally it was the building.

02:21:35

Rien Fertel: Of restaurants that were ghosts, that are gone?

02:21:38

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, they're gone. And none of them were anything less than Allen & Sons or—go to any white town. But there's a sense that if you were good and you worked hard and you went out of business well, "Didn't change with the times, blah, blah, blah." But you couldn't—there were white jobs. You couldn't get a loan, and if you got a loan—in *Mississippi Masala*, remember, Denzel Washington, he has a dry-cleaning business and when he won't stop seeing his South Asian sweetheart, the Indian dad and the white bankers—the Indian dad doesn't want it, and the business, they pull his loan. So he's going to lose his trucks and it's like you have to pay this off right now.

02:22:24

They had the power to do that. So if we could get people to see that. And I'll tell you what, this bothers me with SFA. We have to tell that story clearly. And so when we say that the Greeks came over and they were willing to do any job and they started from nothing and they came in the kitchen—who was in that kitchen? I would say it would have been thirty black people. And did that—you could go and do. There was somebody Greek who would get you

started, whatever; the Korean store, all of that. I'm for it. **[Laughs]** I'm not against that happening, but people don't know that there was no way for an equivalent thing to be had, that the reason that we're here with everybody starting over is baked in. So it's like we know the pieces: red lining and loans, but how can we connect the dots on that not to say, "Oh, how pitiful," but to say how amazing that there is what there is?

02:23:32

And we can't bring it back, the ghost restaurants, but what can we do? How how can we address that? How can we going forward not just say, gentrification, what a shame? We ought to be a voice for that. We ought to be a voice for the young white kids coming in and doing their hip thing and not acknowledging.

02:24:05

So how could say what we know in a not loving but positive way just as we would if someone were bashing someone we love? That we have that knowledge but we don't want—the only way out is through, so it's like having a baby. There's pain. The baby can't get out.

[Laughs] So there's so many good hearted people who want everybody to be over there, but we can't get over there without breaking some dishes or cracking some eggs or something. And we white people are to me the hope of doing it better, faster, not that black people—not disempowering or anything, but it's like, "And they've got it." It's like they're on Twitter and it's like they're not sitting around waiting for me to rescue them.

02:25:09

But we are part of the problem. And the more of us that say—it's like when Dick's Sporting Goods says we're not going to sell it anymore, how do we be that kind of voice? Because we've got the knowledge and we've got the power but we don't want people to be upset

and we don't want—. But you know what, there are things that we wouldn't put with. And so if there's anything that we would not let go by in terms of misogyny or anti-Semitism or cannibalism or "Okay, what about this?" Is there nothing where we wouldn't speak up? And if there's something how do we in a—calling names on the systemic part and just give everybody a pass that says I know that your uncle was a good man? Like whatever you want to tell me, it's like, I get that, but somebody was doing this. **[Laughs]** We've got the photographs. What do we do about it? How do we keep that from happening again?

02:26:15

I remember the Black Lives Matter, I'm on Twitter and the first time I saw it was like people marching and it was in lights. I don't know how it was done. But it was just silhouettes and lights and it said Black Lives Matter. And I thought **[Gasps]**—I was overjoyed. I thought that's it, that's it. And by God, twenty-five minutes later they turned it around: All Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter. And people, of course they fell for it because that machine has been: Voter ID, everybody gets on a plane—they don't. But we've got to go up against the machine, not the individuals. And I know money whatever, I don't know, but I'm just thrilled with all the ways that we do that, but I would like to see more courage and more—. And maybe it's letting people buy in, maybe it's saying we're going to do this. It's like a trigger warning. **[Laughs]** If you want to know why we're still so screwed up come, but you can't talk. **[Laughs]**

02:27:38

Rien Fertel: Just Shut Up and Listen.

02:27:39

Nancy McDermott: Yeah, exactly, because it's all right there. Did you see *The Great Debaters*?

02:27:46

Rien Fertel: No, I didn't.

02:27:48

Nancy McDermott: That's a great one. There's so many good movies. I might get a movie night. So *The Great Debaters* is the debate team that did magnificently—were they from Fisk, I can't remember, but it's an African-American college, an HBCU and it's James Farmer and he's a kid. And his dad was an NAACP leader and attorney and so forth. And so there's a scene where his family and his dad [*Bangs table*]—just like that.

02:28:28

Their family is driving through the country because it was two-lane roads from let's say from Jackson back to wherever they were going. And they're going through the country and everybody is all dressed up. They've been to some big event. Maybe it's a funeral. Maybe it's a political rally or something. But the four kids are in the backseat and they're all nicely dressed. And then going down the country road and dad hits a pig, a hog just gets loose, runs across the road, no chance, he kills it.

02:28:57

And so he gets out and these white men, like three or four white men in overalls, no shoes, come out, and it's like, "Okay we've got you." And he offers to pay and the son is furious because they are being—it's a horrible horrifying scene and the father knows the most important

thing is that I live and get us out of here. And James Farmer is disgusted and mortified by this father's obsequious—his father does what he have to do to get his family out of there. And you don't blame him, but I said, "Oh my god." The scene in *Selma* where Oprah goes to try to register to vote, it's like it's right there but how do we make people—? We give them food.

[Laughs]

02:29:48

Rien Fertel: All right, well that's a good place to end.

02:29:50

Nancy McDermott: Yes, exactly.

02:29:50

Rien Fertel: So I want to thank you, so much.

02:29:53

Nancy McDermott: Oh, my pleasure. Who put a nickel in me, I always say.

02:29:57

[End Nancie McDermott Interview]