

CURT BLANKENSHIP
Curt's Smoke House – Lexington, TN

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Location: Curt's Smoke House - Lexington, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 30 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Curt Blankenship-Curt's Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: Test, test; okay. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is about 1:40 on a Wednesday, July 23, 2008. I'm at Curt's Smoke House with—with Mr. Curt Blankenship. I'm going to have him introduce himself and give us his birth date, please.

00:00:23

Curt Blankenship: Curt Blankenship, February 6, 1978.

00:00:27

RF: Okay; and those familiar with Lexington Barbecue, Western Tennessee Barbecue, might recognize the address. We're at 93 College Drive, you know just east of downtown Lexington right you know just east of the—the middle of Lexington. This was Hayes' Smoke House for a few years.

00:00:51

CB: Yes.

00:00:52

RF: And when did you acquire it from Mr. Hayes?

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CB: April 13, 2007.

00:01:00

RF: Okay; and what made you want to get into the barbecue business? We should talk about that. Are you—as I understand you’re from here originally?

00:01:09

CB: Yes; sir. First started getting out—I worked at Scott’s with Ricky Parker and he kind of got me into the barbecue business and got me interested in it; and worked with Rick for a while and he kind of showed me what—some of the ropes of what I didn’t know and how to run stuff and got interested in it and kind of wanted to do my own thing. And ‘cause I knew at some point Rick’s sons would take over Scott’s and you know I just didn’t—I kind of wanted to work for myself. So me and Mr. Hayes worked out a deal and started on my own.

00:01:47

RF: What made you want to get into the barbecue business? Was—did you have parents in the restaurant business; did you have any—?

00:01:52

CB: No parents or nothing; I just enjoyed doing it. I enjoy—I enjoy cooking; I enjoy mingling with the people and talking to people. And this way I get to do both—get to cook and to meet people.

00:02:07

RF: And before you started working, how old were you when you started working for Ricky Parker at Scott's Barbecue?

00:02:14

CB: Oh let's see—27.

00:02:21

RF: Okay; so about three years ago?

00:02:23

CB: Uh-hm.

00:02:23

RF: And did you—did you barbecue a lot at home before that in your 20s?

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CB: Yeah; we've been doing it most of all of our lives. I mean I can remember back from when I was a little boy, you know when it's cold out, it was you know, you had to go kill hogs and stuff. So and plus my family, we have a big family and we always do a 4th of July thing of where we barbecue every year and kind of got into it doing it that way and then as I got older I got to doing it for a few other people and friends and stuff on the weekends sometimes. We'd all you know barbecue a hog or something and just kind of took an interest in it from there. And then of course I got hooked up with Ricky and just kind of kept going.

00:03:10

RF: It—it sounds like you had hogs growing up. Did you grow up on a farm around here?

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CB: Yeah; my grandparents and them owned a dairy farm and my uncle raised hogs and stuff and, so yeah, I've kind of pretty much been around a farm all my life.

00:03:25

RF: Did you—when you did these barbecues for July 4th and the winter like you said were they ever whole hog barbecues?

00:03:32

CB: That's always whole hog; there ain't no other way to do it around here.

00:03:35

RF: All right; well tell me about how a—a family goes about cooking a whole hog. Is there a pit already there; do you have to make a new pit each time?

00:03:49

CB: No; we have a pit that's already built. And well it's a transportable one in case we decided to move it to some—one of the other—the aunt's or uncle's houses and do it there this year or grand-mama's and so it's a portable pit but yeah it's already built and we've always know(ed) how to build them 'cause we've always done it and so we built it and then of course we'd always pick out a hog and kill it and scald it and scrape it and all that fun stuff and—.

00:04:18

RF: The—the pit that your family has—did y'all manufacture it or did you buy it and what is it made out of?

00:04:25

CB: No; we built it ourselves. It's built out of a pipe, angle iron, and tin and then you cover the top with pasteboard.

00:04:35

RF: And so the whole hog barbecue was only reserved for special occasions or would you also do it when a hog just needed killing?

00:04:43

CB: We also—we done it sometimes just when a hog needed killing but most of the time just on the 4th of July as far as our family function went. But every once in a while we'd do something different, you know, or like I say buddies of mine or whatnot, all of us would get together and it gives you an excuse to sit up and drink beer for a little while and just sit around and talk about everything you want to talk about.

00:05:11

RF: And—and when you do a whole hog with a family is it still a 24-hour process around there or cooking time?

00:05:21

CB: Yes; sir. Well we've—most of the time we've flipped the hog. We put it on somewhere around 1:00 in the afternoon—dinner or something like that and then we'll flip it about midnight—1:00 in the morning and of course you know there's always a lot of people there for that 'cause they want to snatch ribs out but—. And then after that everybody else gets to go home and go to bed and then some unlucky soul gets to stay and finish cooking.

00:05:50

RF: And well let's talk about who—who the unlucky soul is. When—when your family let's say did whole hog barbecue was there one man in charge? Was it kind of the patriarch; was it—was there a Pit Master in the family?

00:06:04

CB: Most of my time it's either my dad or my uncle—is always—it's always been them two of which one—. Most time my dad stays and cooks and then my uncle will come in 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and just kind of keep it warm for us and wait for the dinner to start but most time it's my dad.

00:06:24

RF: And—and who makes the sauce in the family?

00:06:26

CB: My grandmother.

00:06:27

RF: Well what—can you describe her sauce without you know just describe—is it sweet or vinegary?

00:06:36

CB: No; it's—it's hot. *[Laughs]* It's hot; she makes an extremely peppery sauce but it works extremely well for basting and stuff too but—. Everybody in the family likes it. I don't even know how to make it. My dad knows how to make it but not me; I don't have that recipe yet.

00:06:53

RF: And at a family gathering like this, I mean you go to a barbecue restaurant and you usually have two or three sauces starting with the mild. In your family no mild; you had to suffer through the hot?

00:07:01

CB: No mild; it's all one—it's all one taste. I mean it's either suck it up and burn or put some ketchup or something I guess on it but other than that there ain't no mild and sweet and all that. It's just—it's just one flavor.

00:07:17

RF: Yeah; and what do y'all do when the hog is cooking besides you said drinking lots of beer? Do y'all listen to music or—?

00:07:24

CB: Well sometimes you know; they're—with the family we don't drink a whole lot of beer. That's more less friends and stuff, but the family it's most time you know the aunts and uncles and grandkids and course our kids and stuff you know. Everybody just sits around and enjoys their selves. We grill hamburgers and hotdogs and shoot fireworks and when it gets dark, and everybody just sits around and has a good time.

00:07:51

RF: So you—you started working for Ricky Parker at Scott's when you were 27. How were those first days never having worked in a restaurant but having a lot of experience it sounds like with whole hogs?

00:08:07

CB: It was definitely new. It was [*Laughs*] extremely busy. Wasn't—wasn't really expecting it to be that busy, but Rick does a good business and I was kind of overwhelmed at first, and you know getting used to putting hogs on and flipping them over and getting them off, getting new ones on, and then you know before—after all that's done you've still got the rest of your day to you know—you—to serve people and then after you get done with that you've still got the rest of the night to finish cooking. [*Laughs*] So I mean it's—it's definitely a long process and you have to really enjoy doing it to be in this line of work. Otherwise, you—you're not going to make it.

00:08:50

RF: Right; how long was it before you could actually touch and flip the hogs when you were working with him or you could do it right away—like would he let you—not could you?

00:09:00

CB: Yeah; pretty much the first day. Yeah; Rick—Rick is not going to cut you any slack. You're—you're either going to get in there and do it or you're going to have to go somewhere else. He don't have time to kind of baby-sit you I guess you would say. I mean he's—you're there to work and that's what he's got you hired for. Granted he's going to show you stuff just so you know how to do stuff the proper way and the way he wants it done [*Phone Rings*] and—but other than that no; you're going to jump right in and get hands-on.

00:09:30

RF: Right; and so you took over this place just a little over a year ago. How was—did you—did you already knew Mr. Hayes?

00:09:43

CB: Yeah; we knew Dennis from past years anyway and of course dealing with him at the slaughterhouse and stuff too 'cause at that time he owned a slaughterhouse also and—. So yeah; we already knew Dennis.

00:09:55

RF: Can—can you just tell me a bit about him; what—what kind of man is he?

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CB: Dennis is a happy go lucky fellow. [*Laughs*] He don't—most time you see him he's always in the same mood and pretty much the same pace. He don't get excited much and he's a good

fellow to be around and work with. I mean before I took over here he stayed on with me for about a month to make sure I had everything figured out and how to do stuff here 'cause it's different from what Rick does and—so but other than that it's all pretty much the same.

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RF: Can you describe the process of cooking a whole hog here?

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CB: Well it's not a whole lot different from what Rick does but—course you get your hog. Now mine I have to—I split mine; I cook mine in halves 'cause I cook mine on a rotisserie style.

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RF: Is this from Mr. Hayes; he did it that way?

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CB: Yeah; that's the way Dennis done it and he—he spent a lot of money engineering a cooker to cook this way. It takes I don't know I'm going to say at least 30-percent of the work off of you, so it's not as bad. But you take your hog and you split it and put your halves on and course you get your hickory burning. When it's burnt down you take like a corn scoop, scoop your coals, put it in your fire boxes and start cooking.

00:11:27

RF: So with—when you cook half hogs do you still need—and you're using a rotisserie system, do they still have to be turned?

00:11:35

CB: No; I put mine on already skin up or skin—or skin down. I put mine on skin down so I never flip mine. I cook mine complete from one side.

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RF: And how long is—is the cooking process?

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CB: Roughly about—I can get them done in 18-hours but I prefer about 20 to 21 to let them—that way they're not rushed up 'cause if I have to hurry and cook them in say 16 to 18 hours then you have to really keep an eye on them and make sure you don't scorch them and burn them up or catch it on fire or anything like that.

00:12:13

RF: Yeah; can—can you describe his pit? It's—I've seen pictures of it; I just went and looked at it for the first time. It's—it's pretty amazing; it's—first of all it's huge and—and it looks like a big black barrel drum, just—just huge though. I mean it's the size of you know a giant SUV.

00:12:37

CB: It's made from a—from my understanding it's made out of a tank that goes in the ground at a gas station. And it's—it's separated into three sections that hold five of the platforms I guess you would call them that half—that you lay the half of hog on. There's five to each section. And it basically just rotates the whole entire time.

00:13:08

RF: And so you could do 15 half hogs?

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CB: Unless you cut them up.

00:13:13

RF: Oh you could do more if you cut them?

00:13:13

CB: Yeah; I can do roughly 12—you can do—I can squeeze 15 whole hogs on it but I have to take and cut them up and—and that way I can maneuver each piece kind of like putting together a puzzle to where you can squeeze more on it but that only calls for that like on big occasions—Memorial Day or 4th of July or something like that when you've got to cook a whole—whole lot at one time.

00:13:42

RF: Yeah; did—did Mr. Hayes, did he weld this himself or did he have someone do it? Do you know?

00:13:46

CB: No; Ed Scott—he's a—he's the one that put it altogether and kind of welded everything and leveled everything out and you know he shot a lot of stuff in on transits and everything to make sure everything was level and nothing would get bound up or anything like that.

00:14:08

RF: But it—but it runs on electricity?

00:14:09

CB: Yes; all the time. Now if the electricity goes out in a storm or something then you have problems 'cause you have to go out there and take the chains off, put a pipe wrench on it and then you have to stand there and turn it by hand.

00:14:23

RF: [*Laughs*] How much effort does that take? Is it real heavy?

00:14:27

CB: If it's loaded with hogs; yes. It takes a lot of effort and you'll be praying for the electricity to come back on as soon as possible.

00:14:34

RF: Have you had to do that?

00:14:36

CB: Yeah; we've had to do it a couple times. It's not very much fun and—which now we're—we're trying to figure out some way to rig a generator up to it, to where we'll have a back up system but right now it's still all manual power. *[Laughs]*

00:14:52

RF: What—what do you think the—the rotisserie does to the—to the meat to the cooking that you know just a pit with coals underneath where the pig just stays? What does it do differently?

00:15:10

CB: One thing that helps me out is the—being mine is already skinned down, they're already—they're already standing up so all my grease—I catch all my grease, which helps them cook a little faster and you know it don't dry them out as bad. So all my grease will puddle up in the middle of the rib cage and plus what you are losing that's dripping off the hog above it is dripping down on the hog below it, so it's constantly dripping on the other one also so I mean I don't—I lose grease but I don't lose as much grease as you would on a—you know an old-style pit to where they cook with the skin up and a lot of their grease just drops down into their coals. Plus I—I run you know less risk of a grease fire.

00:15:57

RF: Yeah; has there ever been a fire in that machine? Is it possible?

00:16:05

CB: Yeah; we've had a couple fires.

00:16:07

RF: Oh really?

00:16:07

CB: But—yeah and Dennis has had—Dennis had two bad fires that actually it burnt all that down out there at one time and he had to build it—his shed and everything back. We've had a couple fires but nothing that you know was—that we didn't get back under control 'cause a lot—most time it'll catch on fire on the inside sometimes and you just shut—shut the air off to it and it'll smother itself out but sometimes it'll get—try to get away from you and—at that point it's hustle up and get it put out before everything else catches on fire and burns the hogs up.

00:16:43

RF: Right; but can it actually—can it damage the—the cooker, a fire, or is it because it's steel it's just nothing ever happens?

00:16:55

CB: It—it could if it got way out of hand I guess 'cause I guess if it gets hot enough it's going to start warping stuff. And if you warp your racks and stuff then [*Phone Rings*] you're going to have problems 'cause then there ain't—I mean you've got to pull that rack out because there's very close tolerances in the racks when they pass each other. And if you get a warped rack then that's going to hang one of the other racks which is going to cause it to dump your hogs, and then you've got a bad mess 'cause then all your hogs are laying down in your fire box and the cooker gets locked up and then it starts you know it'll break the chains and all that stuff, so yeah; it's a mess.

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RF: Did—did Mr. Hayes ever say why he wanted a pit like this?

00:17:43

CB: One was ‘cause it took a lot—it took some of the work off of him and when Dennis was here it was just Dennis and his wife and then he had some other girls that worked for him. This way, you know, Dennis could put hogs on by his self; he didn’t have to have another male figure in order to help him flip hogs and put hogs on and—.

00:18:08

RF: And he was an older man at the time?

00:18:08

CB: Yes; yeah Dennis is I guess 60 or getting close to it anyway.

00:18:14

RF: Right; and let’s talk about the—do—about the—the pig. Do you—do you spice it or season it before you put it on at all?

00:18:26

CB: Oh, not before I put it on. I may put a little salt on them sometimes just to kind of help draw some—some of the blood up out of it but for the most part not before. Now while cooking we’ll baste it with some vinegar based sauce ‘cause if we try our in-house sauce it’s ketchup—

it's got a lot of ketchup in it and the ketchup will burn and it'll turn it black and then it makes your hog look burnt and so we use a vinegar based sauce and I use that to baste with.

00:18:58

RF: How—how often do you do that while it's turning?

00:19:00

CB: Most times—

00:19:02

RF: How many times?

00:19:06

CB: About three, four times I guess; we try to do it you know once every three hours—four hours. We just try to baste it—most times it's between every other firing is what we try to do it as. And you know it's depending.

00:19:18

RF: And—and you talked about the house sauce here. Does it come from Dennis Hayes or did you bring it in when you came in?

00:19:28

CB: It's a—it's a little mixture of both; we took Dennis' recipe that he had and then we kind of put our own tweak to it, and that's how we have our in—that's our in-house sauce.

00:19:44

RF: And do you have—do you have two sauces or three?

00:19:48

CB: We have a mild sauce, a hot sauce and a sweet sauce. We do all three and then of course some—I have one or two customers that just want my vinegar sauce that I use for basting, so—but they know to ask for it. That's not you know I don't put it on the tables or advertise it or anything.

00:20:08

RF: Right, right; have you ever thought about adding your grandmother's sauce?

00:20:11

CB: Some of the tweaks that's part of the [*Laughs*]*—*the sauce we have now is something similar to hers 'cause when we started playing with it daddy of course being he knows grand-mama's recipe kind of said well let's try it this way and let's add a little bit of this and—. So part of it is kind of grand-mama's sauce but it's just kind of—they're kind of meshed together, I guess you would say between Dennis and grand-mama and then some other little things.

00:20:37

RF: Yeah; and—and you said the—the wood is—you burn 100-percent hickory. Is—is that correct?

00:20:46

CB: Yeah; that's correct. It's all hickory.

00:20:49

RF: Okay; and I think your place is—I guess it's—it's famous for having a giant woodpile behind which you don't see in most places. *[Laughs]* Most places just keep a little bit and chuck it in daily. Was that a Hayes thing; why—why do you do that?

00:21:06

CB: Yeah; Dennis done—started that where he had his wood pile and stuff. That way you don't ever have to worry about you know if somebody calls in something or has an order, you don't have to worry about trying to run and get—well I don't have enough wood for this but—. So you always have wood on hand that way—. Plus I have you know a lot of people will come by; they're going to try to do a little barbecue or cook a few chickens or something and they want a little bit of wood and stuff like that, so—. I try to keep enough on hand at all times.

00:21:38

RF: Do you also do ribs and chickens here?

00:21:44

CB: Do ribs, do chickens, we do barbecue bologna, turkeys, hams—pretty much name it, I cook it. I have people bring me stuff and—that I cook you know special cook for people and I've done a lot of wild and crazy things and—.

00:22:00

RF: [*Laughs*] Well like—like what?

00:22:03

CB: A lot of people around here like barbecued goat. I don't—you know it's not too bad and I don't mind doing that or coons or swamp rabbit is really good.

00:22:14

RF: What is—what is a swamp rabbit?

00:22:15

CB: It's like extremely over-sized rabbit. [*Laughs*]

00:22:19

RF: Really?

00:22:19

CB: It's like three times the size of a normal rabbit. You know they're huge.

00:22:25

RF: And—and you barbecued it? How long does it take?

00:22:27

CB: You can get them done in about two and a half hours or three, yeah. I guess the worst thing I've ever had to do was beaver. I do not like barbecuing beavers though.

00:22:37

RF: How much—how much fat and meat does beaver have on it?

00:22:40

CB: Depending on the beaver but I guess on the average about six—seven pounds of meat but it's extremely dark and greasy, you know. The meat on it is almost black.

00:22:53

RF: What is swamp rabbit meat like?

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CB: It's really good surprisingly you know. It's kind of—it's a real lean meat and it turns out really well. I mean it—it has a good flavor to it.

00:23:04

RF: Do people hunt these with—you have to shoot them?

00:23:07

CB: Yeah, yeah; people have—. [*Laughs*]

00:23:08

RF: They're big.

00:23:11

CB: Yeah, yeah; they carry their dogs and stuff and have them flushed out and everything and they shoot.

00:23:16

RF: What color is the coat on a swamp rabbit?

00:23:20

CB: Most are light brown. But a lot—I don't—I make them skin them before they bring them to me 'cause if I have to skin them it's going to cost extra. *[Laughs]*

00:23:28

RF: Right, right, right; so—so tell me why you think—I want to ask a more abstract question. Tell me why you think whole hog barbecue is so important in—in this area, in this county, in this city?

00:23:43

CB: People around here I guess have been eating barbecue most of their lives and stuff and they come in and they know what they want. You know they know if they want shoulder meat, they know if they want tenderloin or middlin' or you know a real lean ham meat or something like that, and if you don't have it they're not going to eat it. So I mean that's the only way you can satisfy everybody is to just do the whole hog 'cause there's—they like too much different stuff.

00:24:16

RF: Growing up were there any—I mean we know Scott’s was open but was—was there any other restaurant—whole hog restaurants open within a—either in the city or within the drive?

00:24:26

CB: Priest Ellis was open and he done it for a long time, which he’s real—he’s known more for his sauce. He has a sauce that nobody knows how he made. I guess his wife says that she knows how to make it, but she won't give anybody the recipe so—and everybody says that Priest carried it to his grave with him.

00:24:48

RF: Where—where was his store and where was it called—what was it called?

00:24:52

CB: As far as the name of it I don't remember the name of the place, but it was on—back in towards town, back—back around—on down there towards Reid’s Chapel and stuff. It was on down that way but he was real well known around here for barbecue and done it for a lot of years.

00:25:15

RF: Uh-hm; so what’s the most difficult part of not only whole hog but having your own restaurant?

00:25:24

CB: One is all the paperwork you have to keep up with; that's ridiculous. But other than that it's just all the hours 'cause a lot of people don't see everything that goes on you know. We have some you know—some people don't realize how much work actually goes into barbecue. They think it's like a hamburger or something; you just put it on and a few hours later it's done.

00:25:48

RF: I mean even—even all the people who—who have grown up here, have been born here, and eat whole hog every week, do you think they appreciate the man hours that go into it?

00:26:00

CB: The people that know how it's done—yes; they—you know they it's a lot of work and that you put in a lot of hours, you know 'cause at some point in time they've probably done it their selves in a backyard or something like that. And but for people that just move in here that don't know anything about it, I'm sure they appreciate it but you know I don't think they really realize how much work actually goes into it.

00:26:24

RF: Right; so I mean you're—you're a young guy and you have your own restaurant. Did you—did you know what you were getting yourself into? What were those first—you know what's the first year been like—besides the paperwork, and paperwork is awful?

00:26:39

CB: Other than that it's been good you know; it's—it's nice to especially be your own boss 'cause you don't have anybody to answer to but—. And for—you know I kind of knew what I

was getting myself into 'cause you know I run—I helped run Scott's for a little for Rick and I kind of got a taste of it and what it was going to be like there and for the most part I enjoy it. I enjoy doing it.

00:27:05

RF: And—and tell me where you think your business is going to go; what's your—your plans for the next couple years or what do you want to happen?

00:27:15

CB: Hopefully to maintain; I'd like to you know I like where I'm at and you know I'd like to stay open and the best—best case scenario I guess would be to franchise. That would be wonderful but it's kind of hard to franchise barbecue 'cause a lot of people ain't willing to put in that many hours and two, you can't just trust everybody to cook it you know 'cause a lot of people don't—ain't going to worry about it, you know. Who cares you know if it's burnt up or tastes bad or whatever, so—.

00:27:50

RF: Have other franchises from outside Lexington moved to this area and tried to go at barbecue?

00:27:57

CB: Nothing other than Corky's in Jackson—other than that no; it's pretty much you know in-house you know people. People pretty much know you know there ain't—there's been a few

others that—that have tried to open up little barbecue pits here and there but they don't never last.

00:28:19

RF: So and how—how do you eat your sandwich?

00:28:22

CB: I like middlin' meat about medium hot and that's it.

00:28:31

RF: No slaw?

00:28:31

CB: No slaw.

00:28:33

RF: What do you think is with the slaw thing?

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CB: I don't know; I don't—I don't—some people really like slaw on them. To me, I—no; I—if I'm going to eat slaw I want it on the side or something. I—I just don't care nothing about it on my sandwich.

00:28:46

RF: Is that a family thing?

00:28:49

CB: I don't really—some people—I mean some people in my family like slaw on theirs. It's just—I guess it's an acquired taste. I just—when I'm eating it I'm eating for the barbecue. I'm not eating to taste slaw so I just—I want meat and bread.

00:29:02

RF: Right; so—so just one or two more questions. What—what should people know about whole hog barbecue that maybe they don't?

00:29:13

CB: One is it's not as easy as what some people would think that it is 'cause a lot of people have that misconception that have not actually barbecued themselves. They think you know well there ain't that much to it, you know that there is a lot of work that actually goes into it from the starting process to the end process. That would be one of the main things is that people actually know how much work actually goes into doing it.

00:29:50

RF: All right; well I want to thank you very much. Thank you for the interview it was very informative.

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CB: Appreciate it; thank you for coming out.

00:29:58

RF: All right; thank you.

00:30:02

[End Curt Blankenship-Curt's Interview]