

CHRIS SILER
Siler's Old Time BBQ – Henderson, TN

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Date: July 9, 2008
Location: Siler's Old Time BBQ - Henderson, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 56 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Chris Siler-Siler's Old Time Barbecue]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: Okay; this is Rien Fertel from the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is July 9, 2008, a Wednesday; a little after 9:15 in the morning. I'm at Siler's Old Time Barbecue in Henderson, Tennessee. The address is 6060 State Route 100-East. I am with the owner, Chris Siler. Chris, can you please introduce yourself with your name and your birth date please?

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Chris Sadler: My name is Chris Siler; I was born on May 5, 1975. I've been doing barbecue for a few years now.

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RF: All right; well let's talk about that, but first you—you just—you are the owner of this barbecue restaurant?

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CS: Yes; I am.

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RF: And for how long have you been the owner of Siler's Old Time Barbecue?

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CS: Four months.

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RF: Four months, so—so recent; that’s—you know not too far back but you have worked at this location. It’s been a barbecue restaurant for a long, long time I think—almost 50 years maybe?

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CS: It’s more—there’s been somebody cooking barbecue here in some fashion or a way for about 150 years.

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RF: So 150 years at this—in this building?

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CS: Well not this building but this location. The building wasn’t built until the ‘60s; before that they used to just cook outside under holes in the ground and under the trees out here. This was at one point in time—it was kind of an oak grove, so everybody would cook out here and they’d just dig a hole in the ground and start cooking the hog. And they’ve been doing that for years.

00:01:38

RF: Okay; well let’s—how—how did you—when did you start working on—at this location and in this building?

00:01:43

CS: I started here in 2002 with Chad Sellers when he was the owner and I worked with him out here for three years. I was his Store Manager. Pretty much then I did the same thing that I do now except for now I'm the owner; so—. **[Laughs]** It's a little bit different.

00:02:01

RF: Did—did you cook? Did you prepare food and sell food, back—back then when you worked for Chad?

00:02:06

CS: Yeah; I did. We have a full-time cook but it was real important to Chad that you know I knew how to do the cooking and everything like that, so that way if something ever happened, I could fill in. But yeah; I do know how to cook but I ain't going to hide the fact that my cook is better at it than I am.

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RF: And what's that cook's name?

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CS: Ronnie Hampton.

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RF: And how long has he been working here?

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CS: Ronnie has been here on and off for 10 years. He started out here with the owner—when Bobby Sells used to own this place when it was Bobby’s Barbecue and he worked for Bobby for a number of years and then he—when—Bobby is—is Chad Seller’s daddy-in-law. Chad bought it from—from Bobby and then when Chad had it he worked here with Chad all the way up until I think a year before I bought it back out—or I bought Chad out and then when I bought it out I hired Ronnie back. So on—on and off he’s been here for 10 years.

00:02:59

RF: Okay; and tell me what—I think it’s interesting what happened to Mr. Sellers, where he went. Can you just talk about that for a moment ‘cause the Southern Foodways did interview him several years ago, so just an update on him?

00:03:12

CS: Well Chad, he’s—he’s a Minister. He’s been a Minister for years now and he has—he decided to get out of the barbecue business because he was going to go and become a Missionary in the country of Nepal. And him and his family are in the preparations of moving to Nepal, hopefully I think he hopefully wants to be over there within the next year and a half. But that was the main reason—that was his reason for getting out of barbecue is he felt that needed to—you know he felt God leading him to go do that. And that’s actually a long family I don’t want to say business because it’s not really a business but it’s a long family organization. His—it was started by his sister and brother-in-law who died over there in a plane wreck and then it was taken over by his father, who has taken care of it for the last I think 15 years. I—I may be off on that but I think it’s 15 years and his dad has had a stroke, and so now Chad is kind of stepping in to kind of take over to help with what his dad can’t do anymore.

00:04:15

RF: Well let's talk about Chad bought it from Bobby, his father-in-law and you've talked a bit about the history of—of the long, long history of this location. Do you know anything else; do you want to add anything else of what—or have you heard from maybe old customers or from Bobby—I don't know; you probably met Bobby at some point?

00:04:36

CS: Oh yeah. [*Phone Rings*]

00:04:36

RF: Do you need to get that? So do you know anything else about the long history of this location and restaurant?

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CS: I just—I just have heard people talk about when they used to cook here there used to be a large family reunion. I think it was the—I think it's the Trice family, I believe, used to have a huge reunion out here for years and years. And basically they would lease or rent or hire out whoever was cooking out here and they would have over 1,000 of the family members show up to this location over a weekend. And that was—that was a big event for years out here. Some of the other people I've heard them talk about when they've owned it you know just talk about the numbers of hog they used to sell and—and by comparison you know we don't sell anywhere near as many hogs as they used to. But hogs are harder to come by and they're a lot more expensive than they used to be too.

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But I've heard them talk about you know selling 50 and 60 hogs over a weekend out here—the way they used to do, and I do know—I want to say it was the Noble family. When they owned this—they owned this; they—it was right after the building was bought you know one of the big bragging rights then was that this was one of the places where they filmed *Walking Tall*, the original *Walking Tall* out here, which I think is one in the same but you know everybody grabs a hold of every little bit of advertisement that they can. But as far as the old, old stuff of cooking I've just heard people talk about they used to come out here when they was a kid and just seeing how they cooked and how they did sauce and stuff like that. You know they used to cook the sauce in a big old black kettle that was out on the fire, and when people would come up and get, you know, barbecue—come out here at midnight when—they—they would stay here around the clock and talk about putting barbecue sauce on with a little rag and stuff on their sandwiches and stuff like that. You hear people tell stories of—of things like that. But pretty much you just hear people just talking about coming out here—when I was a kid I come out here and you know and—which is interesting sometimes 'cause some of these people get to talking to you and they're 81 and they're talking about coming out here when they was a little kid or their parents coming out here when they were kids and—and that's how we figured out this place has been here for about 150 years at least—just from talking to some of the older folks talking about being out here and stuff like that. So I mean it's—it's just—it's just been a—it's—it's just been an old family tradition out here to cook barbecue just 'cause it's—this area is surrounded by farms and it used to be if the farmer wanted to go eat that's what they—that's what they did.

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RF: Uh-hm; and let's talk about—let's talk about farms. You grew up on—on a farm?

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CS: No; I grew up in between farms.

00:07:13

RF: You grew up in between farms but you grew up in this area. What—what town were you born in?

00:07:20

CS: I actually grew up around Silerton, Tennessee which is not far from here. My dad didn't actually own a farm. He grew up on a farm but we were in between farms. We grew—I grew up right next to a dairy farm and my uncle had a hog farm. And I spent most of my—my younger days being, as my dad said, leased out. He made me go work at one or the other and we—we would do jobs. You know they had kids and so we'd all—he'd hire all—all the kids to do something you know to clean a barn or something like that. So we've been around stuff like that for most of my life.

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RF: Where you were born Silerton, Tennessee is that named after your family?

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CS: Yes; it is.

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RF: So your family has been there for how long?

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CS: I—I don't know; it's—they've been there a while.

00:08:01

RF: How—how far is it from where we are now, just east of Henderson?

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CS: It's less than 15 miles. It's—it's the other side of Chickasaw State Park. But yeah; I mean it's—it's a little small unincorporated town that was—I'm trying—I can't remember; I think it was my great-great-uncle was the first one to move there and it's—and it started out it was just you know his—his brothers and sisters and then it just kind of spread out a little bit. And I think the town has got a population of maybe 150. Anyway it's all—they're all kin to me one way or another.

00:08:38

RF: Uh-hm; is—is your father still alive?

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CS: Yes; he is.

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RF: And what did he do when you were growing up? What was his profession?

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CS: He actually owns an auto body shop in Bolívar. And he still does that. But like I said his dad was a farmer and he grew up on farms and I think that's why he didn't want to farm.

00:08:55

RF: When he would—you said he would rent you out to other farms, the farms in the vicinity would you work with animals or would you do mostly cleaning and—?

00:09:05

CS: It—it just greatly depended on what was going on. The dairy farm I grew up with you know of course it was a dairy farm so there was a lot of things that—that me—he had five kids and so he would hire all of the kids around there to do different things. There was a lot of things that we weren't allowed to do just 'cause of you know OSHA and different reg licenses and stuff like that and things that he just you know we weren't allowed to mess with the—the inside of the dairy farm where they actually did the milking of the cows and stuff like that where they had the milkers out 'cause—just 'cause of clean-up just mainly.

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But it was a lot of things where we would do—like we would—we would help some with separating the calves from the cows and doing things like that and you know helping them—helping them change pastures and this, that, and the other you know the really nasty downside of it—if an animal died we would help with cleaning that up and getting that out of the pasture and things of that nature. And then he would hire us once a year—his winter barn; at the end of the

winter he would hire us to come in and clean it out, which was usually a two-week process and it was nasty. **[Laughs]**

00:10:07

RF: Did—did your father cook? Do you remember him cooking or did he barbecue more importantly?

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CS: He didn't really so much barbecue like we do but you know we did a lot of grilling out and different things of that nature and just you know we did a lot of catfish, fries, and—and he would do a lot of stuff on a smoker and on a grill and stuff like that as a kid. The majority of the cooking that we did that was really like uniquely southern cooking come from my step-great-grandparents. My uncle I was talking about that had a hog farm, once a year we would slaughter a hog ourselves and cut it up and process it and we would put it in a smoker and smoke it out in the smokehouse—an old-fashioned smokehouse and so we had a lot of—we had a lot of times where it was you there was two or three days there that all this was going on. We were grinding sausage and no power grinder. We had the—the hand-crank grinder. They would line me and my cousins up and every one of them would take a turn until their arm gave out. And so we would you know—we would make homemade sausage and make you know honey—honey ham and different things like that and we'd cook—you know cure it all in our smokehouse, which was something I think it was—I've always—that's always been something that's kind of southern and you just don't see a lot of anymore.

00:11:25

RF: Right; yeah I want to ask a few more questions about that because it's interesting. You don't see much of that anymore and you know even in your generation and you're young, I don't think too many people your age were doing that. So what—was it for special occasions, this—this hog or was it just a family gathering weekend?

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CS: It was mainly for—it was just kind of—it was a little bit of a family thing but a lot of it was preparing for Christmas because at Christmas time we would have this huge Christmas dinner over there and we would you know—they would have breakfast. Everybody would have, you know, fresh ham for breakfast on Christmas and sausage and we'd have sausage and stuff until, you know, just 'til it run out. But it was—it was mostly just something for the family to do. My uncle did it just 'cause he wanted some, you know—he would want part of it and there was just no way him and his wife and my cousins could eat all of a hog within the certain time limit and every—we—we all lived within a quarter mile of each other, so we were so close it was just—it just turned into a little family event.

00:12:31

RF: Uh-hm; what kind of sausage was it that y'all were making?

00:12:35

CS: Well it was just you know a homemade sausage just like a you know red pepper sausage like you'd buy at the store like sausage link type stuff.

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RF: And y'all would grill it?

00:12:43

CS: No; mostly they just—it was [*Phone Rings*]—

00:12:47

RF: Y'all would just eat it with the casing and everything?

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CS: Yeah; we would cook—we would cook it in the house on a—in a skillet or something like that.

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RF: Okay; and was any of this considered barbecue with like a red sweet tomato(ey) sauce or anything?

00:13:00

CS: No, not really; this was just—like I said it was just ham. You know you'd have sausage and ham and they would cure some with honey and you know they'd cure some with sugar—hams, but mostly there wasn't really any of this that would be considered barbecue. But it did—I think it—it kind of helped me a little bit 'cause when—when you know I first got into this with Chad it wasn't really that much of a deal for me to go to the slaughterhouse or see that you know. We had done that and been there and that was just an old thing to me after you know after growing up and seeing this other stuff.

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RF: How—how was the—the first days—how old were you when you started working for Mr. Sellers?

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CS: I think I was—I think I was 27.

00:13:47

RF: And how were those—those first weeks working for him in a restaurant? Had—had you worked in a restaurant before?

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CS: Actually I had; I had worked at fast-food restaurants before. I had worked—you know I worked in one as a teenager when I was in high school and I used to work night security and so I'd also work a day job as—as—as a maintenance man at a restaurant—at a fast-food restaurant. So I had kind of been around that a lot and I was kind of used to that pace before because I had been—you know had done that. And I had—had, you know, when I was younger, I had family who had little mom and pop restaurants and had helped out with things like that, so it was—it was kind of new but it really wasn't.

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RF: Uh-hm; and you were used to the long hours that go with whole hog barbecue?

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CS: Yeah; that—that come from growing up around farms.

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RF: Well let's—let's talk about whole hog. So we've established that you—you cook whole hog here. You are open just three days a week; correct?

00:14:43

CS: Yes; we're only open three days a week.

00:14:46

RF: Well let's talk about how—how it starts. Today is a Wednesday; you just put a pig on the pit outside. Let's talk about when you, you know when you woke up this morning you went and got the pig. Can you talk a bit about that?

00:15:01

CS: Yeah; like on a normal day cooking hogs I usually start at 6:00 in the morning to go to Lexington is where the slaughterhouse is. I live in—I live in Pinson which is just about five miles south of Jackson, or actually my house is about five miles south of Jackson I think. Pinson, the town itself is a little further. But you know and I get up in the morning and go pick up the hog at the slaughterhouse and when we come back we put the hog on. And it's just—that just starts the process. Usually by 8 o'clock, 8:30 in the morning we have a hog on and then it's a slow process of firing the hog every—every 15 minutes for a little while then every 45 minutes and then eventually you get to where you're firing it once an hour and this lasts for 14 hours of

firing it. After about 14 hours of firing it the hog can simmer for about 12 hours. And the way our pits are built they hold heat because they've been lined with sand inside the blocks, so they hold heat for a long time so you don't have to fire them that much after that first 14 hours. And the pits will stay 300-degrees, 200-degrees forever and when we get back—I'll come back in the morning, we'll flip hogs and it's been 24 hours that the hog was started and cooked. And the majority of that time somebody has to stay out here with it.

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Like I said you know my cook, he spends 14 hours with it and if he didn't—if he's not the one that is spending 14 hours with it I am, and so it's just—it's just a long process you have to be patient with.

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RF: During—during that 12-hour period where it simmers or 10-hour period you said where it—?

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CS: Ten or twelve.

00:16:37

RF: Ten or twelve when it simmers is anyone here?

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CS: Yes and no; that's when we can break away and go get some rest.

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RF: Okay; so tell me you—you—what do you fire it with? What kind of fuel do you use?

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CS: We use only hickory sticks to burn it down to—to coals and that's—that's the only thing we use for the fuel for the fire I guess you'd say.

00:17:00

RF: Okay; and I took some pictures of the hickory sticks that come in big bundles. Where do you get them from?

00:17:02

CS: I buy those from Gamble's Sawmill out of Adamsville, Tennessee. He's about the only person left around here who carries hickory on—on—has a pretty good supply of it. If I'm not mistaken I think that's all he does now is cut hickory sticks for barbecue pits. There's quite a few barbecue pits that still use hickory wood in their cooking; let's say I know—I know of two in Chester County for sure but there's—but he—he delivers I believe as far as Memphis on his—on the hickory sticks. So he's got a pretty good little business going; he covers a lot of West Tennessee.

00:17:45

RF: Does he have a tree farm or does he—?

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CS: I believe he just buys from customers like people wanting to clear off land or whatever or people selling timber and I think he's hooked up with a lot of sawmills and he gets their after-cuts which you know most—most times sawmills cut logs and they have to be eight-foot long or they can't you know they can't use them if they're under eight—they're not able to use them and I think he gets a lot of the undercut stuff and the after—you know the scraps from places like that to cut into—to cut into sticks, which I guess by doing that then you—at least you don't have nothing go to waste. But he does do a lot of—they do a lot of tree-cutting during the—the winter months when everything is really slow. He does a lot of cutting and they haul a lot of logs in during the winter so he has a stock sitting on his—on his place out there cutting.

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RF: I want to ask a question or two about the slaughterhouse. When you go in the morning do you get to pick out the—the—I'm guessing it's already slaughtered when you're there?

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CS: Most of the time.

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RF: Most of the time, *[Laughs]* if he—if he's done his job. But do you get—

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CS: Well that depends more on delivery 'cause you've got different farms he's supplying so I mean there's been times when I've got there in the morning and got to go meet the pigs.

[Laughs]

00:18:59

RF: Okay; so do you get—do you get to pick out your pig whether—before or after it's a carcass, before or after they've slaughtered it?

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CS: To—to an extent you do. I've—I've got a pretty good relationship with the people up there so I can go in there and talk to them a little bit and tell them what I want and—and they're pretty good about it. And—and most times the boys that work they're like well how does this one look to you? And I'm like yeah; I'll take that one.

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RF: All right.

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CS: But for the most part you know the—the—the ones that are alive you don't really have a whole lot of picking. You know you can't go say all right I want this one, this one, or this one 'cause usually if you're sitting there and they're—they're still alive you're going to get the first one that comes through 'cause it's just—it's a process of they're behind. Whoever delivers the hogs delivered them late and you're in a hurry too; so you get the first ones they can get—get taken care of quick.

00:19:49

RF: And so when you pick up the pig it's already—it's already gutted and headless?

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CS: Yes.

00:19:57

RF: Do you ever—I have wondered; I've been just a couple of whole hog places and they—they never have the head on the hog and—and the head is good eating sometimes. What happens to the head or why don't people barbecue the head on a whole hog?

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CS: Well there's really not—not a whole lot you can do with it barbecue wise. There's other things that you can do with the head. I think a lot of it has to do with the USDA 'cause there's—I'm—I'm kind of fuzzy on the details on exactly why they don't. I mean the slaughterhouse that I get it from they can't even sell heads, so all the heads that they have go for scrap and they have a special dumpster and everything for you meat scraps and stuff like that that's taken care of. I'm not—I don't know any details as far as like what they do with that. They probably take it to a landfill like most places and bury it.

00:20:48

RF: And how—how—what's the weight of the pig when you pick it up?

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CS: The carcass weight is usually—I usually—we usually aim for a 250 carcass but it fluctuates. Just like the one I put on today was a 192 but like I said it—it fluctuates a good little bit.

00:21:07

RF: And after the 24-cycle of cooking how—how much do you know how much it weighs, how much the shrinkage of the meat is?

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CS: You can figure a hog that's about 190—you're going to get just a little bit less than half of that and half of that weight in barbecue. It's—so you wouldn't quite get—you wouldn't quite get 95-pounds out of it but you know it will be—it will be less than that; it will be closer to 80. It just fluctuates; it just depends a lot—sometimes hogs are fattier. If they have more fat you get less meat out of them 'cause there's more fat than meat. But usually if the—if the farmer—the farmer has got a good stock in his breeding program usually they come out about the same. There's not a lot—there's not a lot of difference and not a lot of fluctuation. So I mean you can usually figure—you can usually easily figure it's a third of whatever the body weight was alive is what you're going to get out of it barbecue wise.

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RF: And—and so you get the pig, you bring it here, you put it on the pit, skin-side up correct?

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CS: Correct.

00:22:11

RF: And do you season the inside or outside?

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CS: We don't; some places do. It's just—it's just depending on the owner and the cook. Some places do season and they—some places they like to inject sauce into their meat, but with us we don't because you know using the straight out hickory coals it actually flavors the meat without having to do anything to it, so we don't—we don't season the meat before or during cooking. Excuse me; it's all after—after we have a finished product when somebody orders it. That's when we season it. And then when like somebody buys a pound we don't season the meat and then pack the pound; we have the pound and we have the sauce that goes with the side. But you know everybody is different. If somebody comes in and wants it seasoned I'll lay it to it and don't even hesitate.

00:23:01

RF: Well that's—so when it's cooking for the 24-hours skin-side up all the fat is dripping down on the coals and does that—does that—what happens with that 'cause you have an enclosed barbecue pit? I visited a couple others in the area and they're open all the time; can you talk about what happens with the—I guess the liquid, if anything happens do you think?

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CS: Well when we cook ours down we cook with aluminum foil and aluminum foil sitting on the bottom of the—bottom of the hog after it cooks for a little while it does create a seal so it

doesn't leak a whole lot. But what—what it does like it drips down into the pit and we have sand that we occasionally we notice that there's you know—there is grease building up here and we put sand on it to try that up because you do not want puddles of grease in your pit where you're throwing coals 'cause that's like throwing I mean—bio-diesel is real popular now and everybody knows how much that burns. It's like well, I've got a whole bunch of it out there in the pit, you know and at the end of the day what happens is when—when the hog is off the pit we go in and take all of the sand and dirt and ashes and dig all that out back down to the—to the bare concrete in the pit, so it's—you're looking at cleaning a pit a lot.

00:24:14

RF: Well what do you do with that sand and—?

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CS: We build the hill out here. On the—that—that's loud; hang on. All right; on the—the driveway to the side of the building it goes around the building that—that hillside used to only be about three or four-foot from the driveway but from there out to where it is now which is somewhere in the neighborhood of 70—80-feet that's all ashes from the pits where different owners have been dumping in that spot and just steadily taking that hillside out.

00:24:50

RF: Oh okay; well let—and you talked about the remnants as bio-diesel and we were talking earlier when we were outside by the pit about—about the danger of—of combustion you know of—of the whole things going up in flames. And you said that has happened before here; can you talk about that—not—not during your ownership?

00:25:10

CS: Well it's—it's happened—I—I don't know how many times in the history of this place that's happened but that's actually happened a lot. There's a long joke that you're not really—you're not really a barbecuer 'til you've burnt your pit down once, which I'll—I'll say that when I was here with Chad before it burnt twice so I've already had my once burnt, so—. But it's just a—we use tarp to smother it and everything like—to deprive it of air 'cause if there's no air it will not burn. But yeah, if it—if it ever does light it's gone in five minutes; it'll—it'll burn the entire building down—well it's not really burning the building down but it'll burn the roof off and you can lose all your hogs in less than five minutes. I've seen that personally and it's—it's amazing to see how fast that will burn.

00:25:59

RF: How hot does it get in there? Is it—do you have to stand well away?

00:26:02

CS: Well it melts all the metal on the top of the building and any metal inside it. But like I said, five minutes later it's all done. *[Laughs]*

00:26:11

RF: All right; and I've always wanted to ask this question. What—do you have fire insurance back there?

00:26:16

CS: It's an uninsurable building. No insurance company will touch it. That was one of the main reasons that—the main building that we're in, the restaurant used to be where they cooked—the pits, and when the—the—the owners of the property which is—that's Rubin Brewer, when—when [*Phone Rings*] they—and that family has owned this place forever as far as I know—but they—during the '70s—or during the '80s—it was late '80s when Bobby Sells owned it they—he had talked to them about moving the pit out—out back so—so they wouldn't lose their main building 'cause you know of course most all the—most of the expensive equipment and everything like that is inside the main building. So if it ever did burn you'd lose everything, and then in doing that they—they agreed to it and built the building out back, so they could—and it was for insurance purposes and everything 'cause he couldn't insure his equipment as long as they were cooking inside the building and she couldn't insure the building, so in the long run it—it secured everybody's investment in the—in the property.

00:27:14

RF: All right; well let's—let's talk about the food. We should get to the food. How many—how many pigs can you cook at one time out—outside in the building?

00:27:23

CS: The way we're currently set up I can cook nine at—at one time.

00:27:28

RF: Okay; and you—so you'll—you'll bring a pig in the building and you'll—you'll serve it out to customers. I guess you kind of scoop out meat. How—when—when a customer comes in

the building what does—and he asks for a sandwich do you—does he specify what cut he wants, what sort of meat he wants from what part of the pig or do you pick if he doesn't ask?

00:27:51

CS: If—if—usually the customer doesn't ask I just usually start with the shoulder—the shoulder end of the hog just 'cause I don't know—it just seems always—always right to start at the front and work your way to the back. But yeah; I mean a lot of the people who know me well come in here and they order specific cuts and so that's not—that's not really an issue or a problem.

That's—that's something—that actually I think it's an advantage to having whole hog barbecue you don't get with the shoulders—cooking shoulders or hams is that when somebody comes in they can—if they've been around this for a while everybody has got their own name for different cuts of meat. And you learn it after a while and so you kind of know that when they come in this person likes this; this person likes this; this person likes this and then you have that advantage of okay how—this person wants really lean meat. And then doing the whole hog you have that opportunity to have very lean meat, whereas doing shoulders—shoulder meat is lean, but it's not as lean as other like ham or tenderloin or something like that. So I mean you have that advantage a lot and it—it helps with your customer base.

00:28:54

RF: Can you talk about some of the nicknames for the cuts of meat? Is it kind of slang; can you talk about something?

00:29:00

CS: Some of it is the one that's probably I think the—the cut of meat that has absolutely the most unusual names for it is—what would be on the hog would be the bacon strips, which is nicknamed middlin'; I've heard it belly lean; let's see—stringy; let's see what was another one—people call it—I hear them call it rib-meat, side-meat, just different things like that. I mean it—it always struck me funny, people—you know especially—the belly lean was the one that always struck me funny because this is actually—there is absolutely nothing lean about that meat at all.

00:29:43

RF: Is it the fattiest part on the pig?

00:29:44

CS: It is definitely the fattiest part of the pig but it's—without a doubt it's the softest and probably the best tasting meat in a hog, but it is definitely the fattiest part of the pig.

00:29:53

RF: And why do they call it middlin'?

00:29:55

CS: Because it's actually directly in the middle of the ham and the shoulder.

00:29:58

RF: And it's also stringy; that's why they call it stringy?

00:30:02

CS: It's the—it stretches from the shoulder and fans out and stretches all the way back to the ham and it's just one layer of meat and—and when you pull it, it all comes off in long strings if it doesn't tear.

00:30:14

RF: And what color is—is this meat? Is it white—?

00:30:17

CS: It's—it's a very bright white.

00:30:21

RF: So just kind of glistening with fat?

00:30:22

CS: Well it comes with a layer of fat on the top of it and a layer of fat on the bottom of it, so it—which is why it has so much flavor to it and why it's so juicy. And if you're cooking sows which most of the time when you slaughter it's what they are—they're sows. This is under the mammary so it—it has a sweet taste to it from that. I've been told that's where the sweet taste comes from but it has a little bit of a sweeter taste to the meat. So but it's just—and there's not much of it in a hog; that's one of the key things is people with our business I'll have people start calling at 8—9 o'clock in the morning ordering middlin' and that's usually the very first meat that I run out of. And I can—I can have—for example, 4th of July, I had six hogs. At 7:30 in the morning I was out of middlin' meat for the day.

00:31:09

RF: On Friday, on July 4th?

00:31:10

CS: On July 4th you know I had meat outside; I had meat everywhere but I didn't—I couldn't sell anymore of that meat 'cause it had all been bought.

00:31:20

RF: Do—can—can people reserve middlin' or other parts? Do you set it aside or wrap it up?

00:31:25

CS: Oh yeah; I—I—they want to call and put their name on it and if I—you know I'll—I'll let anybody call and reserve anything. I've had people call and reserve middlin'; I've had them call and reserve whole hogs before.

00:31:34

RF: So you just wrap—wrap it in paper and put their name on it?

00:31:37

CS: Well most time no; most time I usually know this person is coming—I can't go get that and so I just leave it in the hog as long as possible. Holidays like the 4th of July that's definitely an exception; that's one of those days where the first of the morning I have to start pulling all my orders at the beginning of the day because it's just going to go so fast; if I don't I may lose track and sell somebody else's meat.

00:31:58

RF: And that would be a problem? [*Laughs*]

00:32:02

CS: That's—that's definitely a problem. That makes people very upset.

00:32:04

RF: What—did—are some people so particular—and I'm guessing they are that maybe they come in late in the day and their favorite part of the pig is gone and they just like—they leave; they can't eat?

00:32:16

CS: Happens all the time. I—I have a—and I have—I have a loyal base of customers. They are loyal customers; they come in all the time. They know me well. And you know spending three years out here before, and like I said I spent so much time here before, most of the community knows me, so I mean they come in and I—I tell them. I'm not going to lie to you; I'm just going to be honest with you and tell you what I got. And—and I have a good little number of people that you know they appreciate that and they understand that. They're not real mad about it but they—that's all they'll eat is their particular cuts. And they'll usually leave. And most of the time they tell me before they leave, well hold me a pound of it tomorrow. And I'll come by here and pick it up in the morning or something like that. So it's not really so much like I lose them; it's just that day I don't have what they want so they don't come—they don't buy anything that day and they just come back the next day.

00:33:09

RF: And what—what is your favorite part to eat?

00:33:12

CS: I actually like shoulder meat myself. It's—there is a particular part of the shoulder below the shoulder blade that's kind of like a ball. It's—it's the drier of the shoulder meat but it's the juicier. It's not as dry as like the ham or the tenderloin is but it's a juicier meat, but it's not as—it's not as soft as middlin' which it does taste good. Middlin' does taste good but it's just I like—I like the little bit firmer texture.

00:33:37

RF: What—what's the least popular part of the pig for—with your customers?

00:33:43

CS: The least popular part I would have to say it's probably the really dark meat and the shoulder. I have—which is directly around the shoulder blade. I have a few people who love that meat and—and that's all they want but I don't have many who ask for it. And it's—it's usually—and it has a little bit to do too when I start pulling meat, if nobody specifies I start on the shoulder 'cause you know get rid of it first because if I don't they're not—you know if I serve up all my good meat that people are going to ask for I'm going to be out.

00:34:19

RF: Let—can you say a few things about your clientele? You said some already; do they—do they come from here, do you have people drive in from other parts of the State or from elsewhere?

00:34:28

CS: Yeah; we've—we've got a—the—our local clientele are very, very loyal customers. I mean they—they're good people. They—unfortunately like I said growing up in this area you can't throw a rock in this county without hitting four or five people I'm kin to, so it seems like when they come in I'm a cousin to everybody. That's the curse of large families also 'cause it's just—that's just—that's just a fact of southern life. But I—you know I have a good reputation with my—with my local customers; they know me. They're—you know I really get along with them and have fun with them. But we do have a—a little bit of a loyal outside the—outside the area, customers I have, a few people who make regular trips per year from Nashville and from East Tennessee to see family down here and when they come through they stop in and buy meat. And I've got families from different States; I've got a man from California who every so often wants meat shipped to him. We don't really have a—we're not really set up so much for a shipping—for a shipping operation like a lot of places are but on occasion I've—I've done that before and I know how to ship meat over—you know for long distances and so it's—it's something I'm a little familiar with. And we do—we do that; we work out special—special deals for stuff like that.

00:35:54

But I'd say it's probably—you're looking at probably, three-quarter of my business comes from local and I have 25-percent of my business comes from out of area. And it—it—it amazes me sometimes how far some people have come to get barbecue. Opening weekend we

had advertised for a while that we were reopening and—and everything like that and we had people come all the way from Decatur, Alabama for—for the Grand Opening Weekend just to check it out. So I mean it's stuff like that and then that was kind of interesting to me that somebody would drive that far—not very certain who I was—but it just goes to show you the reputation this—this place has had and it's 'cause—like I said it's been here forever. You know I think local people, they—they hold that this is the first barbecue pit ever made, which I don't know about that totally. I think it maybe just started out some good old boys just started cooking and they really didn't pay attention if it was barbecue or not and just started cooking.

00:36:50

But it's interesting; it's interesting to see how far people have come and you know where people come from. And—and being we're—we're also on a route between Memphis and a very—a couple very popular places on the Tennessee River and so we have a lot of people coming from Memphis going up there to go bass fishing or just play in the lake who swing through and get meat.

00:37:12

RF: So yeah; I mean you're—you're in an amazing location right on the highway right? You know you—you can't miss you as you come around the—around the—.

00:37:20

CS: Right; and I mean it's—it's nice being right on the highway and especially Highway 100 because for years until I-40 was built, Highway 100 was the main route between Memphis and Nashville. You would take 100 until you hit 70 and then take 70 into Nashville. And so I mean this has been for—for a long time, if you was going from Memphis to Nashville this is the way

you went. And so I mean it was—so there's—there's a lot of businesses on Highway 100 that that's where—that's where it all started. A lot of little towns on 100 come from that—from you know traveling through. And you know you have all these little small towns that used to have train stations and stuff like that where you know—so you had the farmers traveling 100 to the different places to—to take their—their grain and stuff to the trains. And—and then people you know so you got a lot of traveling on the highway and then until I-40 was built back in the—I believe it was the '60s, this was the route. Everybody went this way and now that it's become more popular to take—it seems like it's getting more and more popular to get off the interstate when you travel now, Highway—like Highway 100 which is you know I think if you look at a map it's Scenic Highway 100 right now. People are taking—taking these little back roads and those little old highways like I think Route 66 has become very popular going out West again now. And I think a lot of the businesses on that have—have really boomed and picked up because of that—because of the nostalgia effect of that and—and I think this—some of the travel down 100 has been the same way. Definitely with the—since everybody has the—has the large interest in motorcycle and motorcycle riding and stuff like that there's a lot of motorcycle rides that use 100 and we have a large side parking lot and you know welcome people you know—people who ride in large groups. It doesn't bother me one bit. And we have—we have an area to accommodate them for parking, and so that's—that helps with that—that we're on—we're on a nice little scenic route.

00:39:25

RF: Let's talk about the area and whole hog. It seems that this area you know maybe set the standard for whole hog barbecue in Tennessee. So many people—so many restaurants are famous for it or have been famous; a lot of them are gone now. First, let me ask why do you

think—what ties whole hog into this Henderson, Lexington, Jackson corridor that we're in right now?

00:39:59

CS: Well for a lack of a better way of saying it the only thing I can say is this has got to be the most barbecue crazy bunch of people in the world I've ever seen in my life. I have never seen people who love barbecue so much as in this area. And I think the whole hog is just—it's just an old tradition. That's when—when everybody first started cooking barbecue it was just cheaper to buy a whole hog than buy shoulders and it just kind of stuck that way, you know. And like I said there are some—there are some very physical advantages to having whole hog over doing shoulders or hams but there are you know—different people will tell you different things. They'll say there is an advantage of doing shoulders over whole hog which you know I know what our preference is, I know what I prefer, and I can—I'm biased towards that so I don't really criticize shoulders, you know people cooking shoulders. I mean I have personally cooked shoulders before where I've needed to fit you know more meat to fill in and couldn't get a hog. And but you know I prefer it; it's—it's—but I think the biggest thing of it is it's just the tradition of it, you know. That's how it started; that's how everybody used to do it and then that's—I mean that's why we stay with it is that's the way it used to be. And you know that's kind of our whole name—Old Time; we're trying to do everything the old time(y) way.

00:41:15

RF: The way that people used to do it—families used to do it in their backyard? The history of—of this as a meeting point for all those families and hundreds followed?

00:41:26

CS: Right; that's—that's kind of the thing is that this—this way everybody has always done it here and sticking with the old way people like that. It's definitely a more expensive process but it pays off in the end. I mean you have—you have a—you have a better reputation with it; you have something that's a little bit unique because fewer and fewer places are doing whole hog anymore and that—that gives us like our little niche in the market, you know.

00:41:52

RF: Well let's talk about that. The last time Southern Foodways visited this area was a little over five years ago and there were more places doing whole hog. Some of those places have switched to just cuts of meat—shoulders and hams. Why do you think that is?

00:42:10

CS: Well I mean it's a real simple answer. I mean it's harder to find hogs. And it's easier to find shoulders and hams. You can buy shoulders and hams from a meat company in Jackson and have them deliver them. For whole hog around here, there's two places you can buy whole hogs from and one of them is in Paris, Tennessee and one of them is in Lexington. So unless you want to drive and especially with gas prices—keep going up that makes it even more expensive to do. I think that's you know it's got to be the main reason why people have done it just 'cause of ease and just lack of.

00:42:49

RF: I guess you could get shoulders and—and ribs delivered to you and you can't do that with the hog.

00:42:53

CS: Right; well actually I—you know personally I do have my ribs delivered. I don't—I don't pull my ribs out of my hogs. And—and like I said, I have—I have in past been in a pinch and you know that's the problems with hogs; if—if you don't order far enough ahead of time they don't have enough slaughtered and it just—it's a whole mess. But I have been in a pinch before and cooked shoulders to fill in some extra—where I needed some extra meat for extra orders. And like I said you can go—I mean there's—there's a meat company in Jackson. You just go up there and tell them that I want 50 shoulders and they'll sell you 50 shoulders right there on the spot or they'll bring them to you.

00:43:34

But I mean it makes a difference and it—it's a little bit more of a commitment to it I guess you'd say 'cause it—like I said, it is harder. There's local farmers; there's fewer and fewer every year. There's fewer and fewer local farmers who do whole hogs—or who raise hogs. And it seems like most of the farmers now are selling their hogs out to some of the big corporations and you know some of the big meat companies and stuff like that. So it's I mean it's getting tougher. I know the hogs I'm—that I had, the slaughterhouse I think they get most of their hogs now out of a farm in Southern—you know Southwest Kentucky. So it's—I mean that's how it's got around here; there's nobody around here that sells to small orders. It's all catered to—it's all sent to the—the big companies.

00:44:19

RF: And this slaughterhouse it's an independent company; can you say the name?

00:44:24

CS: It's Hays' Meat Company, yes; it's—it's a privately owned slaughterhouse which like I said it's only one of two that I know of in West Tennessee anymore.

00:44:34

RF: And have their—have—have the prices of hogs raised over the past decade?

00:44:38

CS: Oh yeah; they've—they've raised tremendously over the last decade. Prices of hogs really are heavily dependent on the price of diesel 'cause diesel makes the world go round you know [*Laughs*]. That's how it—that's how it works 'cause you figure you know you got to figure in the transportation of the hogs and then before that you had to figure in the—the farming of corn for the grain to feed hogs and so as feed goes up 'cause diesel goes up, hog prices go up, you know which—and you know the end—the end process that means my prices go up. So it's—it's very heavily dependent on fuel cost.

00:45:19

RF: Hmm; I want to ask—you mentioned the ribs. You buy the ribs independently and well before—I want to tie in the ribs to your—to the sauces you have. You have two sauces—the hot and the mild. And I found that when I ate here two weeks ago I found the—the hot with more black pepper than most, which I—I love. Can you talk about that; why—why you do that?

00:45:45

CS: Actually we have three different sauces. We have a rib sauce that—that I have just for the ribs. Well the other two sauces, they're very, very similar to each other. Just like basically the hot has more pepper to it and more—a little bit more spice to it and the mild is a sweeter with less pepper. But aside—aside from the amount of pepper in them there's not a lot of difference between those and they're kind of—it's kind of an old recipe. I mean as far as I know it's Bobby Sells' recipe, what he started out with; Chad—when—when Chad took it over from him and Chad had it and then when I bought Chad out you know that was part of the deal was the recipes were mine. You know of course I have—I have different—everybody has different tastes so they alter the recipe just a little bit to suit themselves and I've done the same thing. You know it's like my hot is a little—you know a little bit hotter than Chad's hot was and my mild is a little sweeter, you know but it's just—everybody—everybody who does it does it to their own taste. I mean it's not—it's not a complicated sauce. It's not something—you know it's not something I'm going to just give the recipe away to, but it's not a complicated sauce. I mean it's something I've tasted you know almost right down to the money the same sauce at different places before. Some people—you know some barbecue pits go—I say it's a little overboard with their sauces sometimes where it's like—. But it—I think they depend more on their sauce for flavor than they do for their meat. And it's like us, I think my—I think our meat has a great flavor without any sauce on it.

00:47:22

But as far as like having a variety or—or what's involved in it, it's just—I mean it's—it's a variety of sauce. You know there's a variety and then there's breaking yourself with too much. And so—and like I said, we—we have the three. I've got the sauce that goes on the ribs when we cook, which I don't sell to customers. It's way too expensive to make.

00:47:43

RF: Yeah; tell me more about it. I did have it when I was last here and it's—I think it's pretty unique and great, so tell me about it—how you came up with it and the name that you gave it and—and why you only serve it with the ribs?

00:47:55

CS: Well it was—it was a happy accident. We had—one of the things that I had done that was—that was different—like I said, everybody who—who has ever run this barbecue pit has their own little unique thing that they add to it. And you know everybody does it to suit their own taste. And not taking anything away from Chad, but when Chad had it I never did like his ribs. I was not a big fan of his ribs and I had always decided—'cause growing up that was on our 4th of July we would buy tons of ribs as a family and that's what we did; we would cook ribs. And jokingly I've got my uncles and my step-dad are the rib connoisseurs of the south is what I say. They—they've all worked jobs where they travel the country and so they've had ribs from all over. And you can't ask my step-dad about ribs without being ready to sit down for two hours. So but and you know and then in the process of that he's—he's tried to imitate the sauces and stuff like that and we've hit on some pretty good things. But so I had—I had a goal of when we opened up that I was going to change the ribs. I wanted something that would make our ribs stand out where it would be something that people would want more. Chad sold ribs pretty well but he was limited on how many days he carried them and that was something that I—I changed. I carry ribs and chickens and stuff every day, so I was going to do something to make my ribs stand out from other people 'cause there are—you know I'm within a half a mile of another barbecue pit who has a very good reputation for ribs. Not that I'm trying to take away from their

business but when you're in this you're going to try to sell everything you can sell. And so, you've got to have something that stands out; so—.

00:49:43

But we had originally settled on a sauce that my cook's wife made and I bought from her. And the way the happy accident happened, she was in a car accident and she was not able to make any sauce for a little while and so I had run out. And instead of just going back to using our regular sauce I just decided one day I was going to get back here in the back and take a—take a mixing bucket and see what happened. And so I started throwing things in the bucket that I liked and we're directly across the road from a little country store which is nice; so I sent somebody across the road to get some sorghum and then decided let's see what happens. And when I got done I had something that—that I really liked and I sold some—sold—made—you know cooked a rack of ribs and sold it—or gave it away as samples and you know we had people standing at the counter sucking on the bone. So I thought well this is—this is some pretty good stuff, so let's—let's go with it and run with it and see how far we can go. And—and so far it's been very good; my rib sales have nearly doubled since I changed the sauce. So I'm—I'm not complaining of that at all.

00:50:47

RF: And what do you call the sauce?

00:50:50

CS: I call it Chris' Crazy Good Rib Sauce.

00:50:53

RF: And it is crazy good and I think it's because the sorghum—it's sorghum molasses correct?

00:50:58

CS: That's one—that's one of the other ingredients. There's about three or four other things in there that I'm just not ready to divulge.

00:51:03

RF: Okay; well the sauce is—is—it's almost clear. You could—you know it's not red and you could almost see through it. You could see all the peppers and stuff in it, the spices in it. And it—it's expensive you told me?

00:51:20

CS: It's very expensive to make mainly because of the sorghum, which is something that I—I buy from a local place and—but they only make it once a year. So they make a year's supply in the month of September which now I'm out and I've done run the country store across the road out, so I'm trying to get a hold of them to see if they had any leftovers still put up, which luckily they've told me that they do so I've got to go contact them here real soon and buy it off of them quickly. But it's—it's something that it's a local business thing too, which I love to support local—any kind of local business 'cause you've got to support your own community. And but sorghum is—it's a very timely process to make. It's a very—that's another—that's something else that I think is fairly uniquely southern too. And there's a lot of barbecue sauces that for—you know that had been a traditional ingredient in—in barbecue sauces before which is what made me think of it. Some of the other stuff are not typical for West Tennessee barbecue sauce, but I thought well I like this; let's see what it does.

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But—but yeah I mean the rib—the rib sauce it's a thinner sauce. I mean the base that I start with is actually my mild sauce which is thin as it is to start with and then once I add all my other ingredients it really thins it out but it—it drastically changed the flavor so much that you don't really—it doesn't taste like mild and it actually seems as if it's hotter than what my mild regular—regular is. But there's no more spice than that in it; the other ingredients are not hot. They're all sweeter, tangy, but it—like I said it was a happy accident.

00:52:57

RF: And just—just one more question about the sorghum. You said it was traditional in Western Tennessee to use sorghum molasses with—with barbecue sauces and now it seems everyone has switched to—to corn syrup. Can—can you tell why; is it—is it because of price, is it because of availability?

00:53:14

CS: I think it's mostly availability and like I said we do use some corn syrup in our regular sauce. It's just you can go to the grocery store and you can find it. You can not really find sorghum; it's—it's harder to find. I wish I actually knew more of the process of making it but I don't, but I do know it's a slow cooking process. I know that much.

00:53:36

But the corn syrup I think is just mainly just 'cause it's there and you can go to Piggly Wiggly and pick as much up as you want usually. And like the sorghum is usually—it's local made stuff; if you find some in a store that's like not local made, it's not going to taste the same, so I mean it's—it's a southern thing and I'm—I'm—I'm not, like I said I'm not exactly sure

what all—what all they have to do to make it. That’s something we never did. But I love it; I love it on pancakes. I’ve had it you know it’s always been—you have to heat it to—you have to heat it to eat it you know ‘cause it’s so thick and it’s so—so—it’s—it’s a liquid but it’s—at room temperature it’s almost solid you know.

00:54:25

RF: What—what color is the sorghum molasses that you put on pancakes that you use for—without a barbecue sauce?

00:54:32

CS: It’s nearly black. It’s very, very, very dark. And what I actually use in my sauce is actually darker than that ‘cause I’m using—which the stuff where they made it where it was actually too dark to sell and too thick to sell by itself, which once you dilute it with other liquids it thins out and then it’s—it’s all right to use.

00:54:55

RF: All right; I just have one more question. Where do you think—we talked about whole hogs kind of you know some people—it’s disappearing in a way. Some people have—have quit doing the whole hog; where do you think it’s—it’s going to go in the future in you know the next 10 years or so? Do you think it’s going to be brought back by new people; do you think more restaurants are going to stop doing it?

00:55:21

CS: That's something I'm really, really uncertain about. If the market stays like it is I think there will be fewer people doing it. I hope it stays—it stays available enough for us to stay in business with it but I've always wondered—it's always one of the things I've always wondered about. You know everything changes so much and so often you don't really know anymore.

00:55:44

RF: Okay; is there anything else you'd like to add?

00:55:47

CS: I can't think of anything else.

00:55:48

RF: All right; well I want to thank you. Thank you very much.

00:55:50

CS: No problem.

00:55:54

[End Chris Siler-Siler's Old Time Barbecue]