

Art Blondin

Artz Rib House—Austin, Texas

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Interviewers: Lisa Powell

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Project: Southern Barbecue Trail - Texas

Southern Foodways Alliance
&
American Studies Department
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:
Lisa Powell

[BEGIN INTERVIEW, Part 1]

00:00:00

Lisa Powell: Today is the fifth of September 2007. This is Lisa Powell, and I am interviewing Art Blondin at Artz Rib House on South Lamar in Austin, Texas. So first, would you state your name and age for the recording?

Art Blondin: Ah, my name is Art Blondin, and I am 52.

LP: Thank you. So just to get us started, do you mind talking about how you first got involved in the barbecue, or the restaurant, business, or both?

AB: Well, let's see. When I first moved to Austin in 1980, I was, ah, in a country band, playing bass in a country band. And every Tuesday we would drive around central Texas looking for gigs for the band, and we'd always search out a barbecue joint, and hit that too. That's what really got me interested in barbecue. And then when I um rented out Art's caboose on West 5th Street, there was a barbecue pit there, so I started messing around with it and experimenting.

LP: And what first brought you to Austin?

AB: I had some friends who were going to open a place on Sixth Street. I had worked for them before in Vermont. And, um, I came down here with them, and they eventually didn't open the place, they ended up going back, and I stuck around, because I was real interested in playing music, and it was just so nice down here.

LP: Um, and what, how did you find out about, or get involved with, the caboose, which you rented?

AB: At the, uh, before that I was working down on Sixth Street at a bar called Gordo's. And, um, I worked, I started out as a bartender there, and eventually became a manager. And then I ended up leasing the kitchen out from them, and, uh started my own operation out of that. And, and when they ended up closing down, I just looked, started looking around for places, and the caboose came open.

LP: Okay. Would you mind describing the caboose a little bit? Um, you said there was a barbecue pit there. Um, what else was there when you first got it?

AB: Not a lot. It's a small little caboose. And it had three or four tables inside, a kitchen, and a little patio area outside with picnic tables and stuff. So, because it was so small, and it was a central downtown location, what I ended up doing was a big delivery business out of it. And, um, we kept that, that was, that went for about six years.

00:02:55

LP: And what happened after those six years?

AB: Well, after four years, uh, the Rib House, this location came open. And, um, I eventually figured out how *[laughs]*—a way to get a hold of it. And for a couple of years I was running

them both, at the same time, and that got to be a little bit too much, so I, we closed down the caboose and concentrated on this location.

LP: And what is the exact address of this location, Artz Rib House?

AB: This is 2330 South Lamar, in the 78704 zip code.

LP: Thank you. And so what was here in this location before you took it over?

AB: Before I took it over it was a seafood place, called South Point Seafood. And it had been closed for about a year when I got here, so there was a lot of cleaning up to do.

LP: And so what did you do to the building, to the location, to get it ready, other than cleaning *[laughs]*, to be Artz Rib House?

AB: Um, not a heck of a lot. We tore down a wall and moved a smoker in. And um, uh, pretty much just painted and, uh, got some new furniture, and a couple of new kitchen gadgets, and off we went.

LP: Um, so you mentioned that you moved a, you moved a smoker in. Is the smoker the primary way that you cook your meat?

00:04:35

AB: Yes, it is. It's a pretty good sized smoker. It cooks, I think, 800 pounds of meat at a time, and, uh, it's fairly automated, and it works out real well.

LP: And so then was this a difference, from how you cooked your meat at the caboose? I think you mentioned there was a pit there.

AB: Yeah, there was a pit there. It was a brick smoker. Um, and, uh, you couldn't fit a lot in there, but it did a really good job. I don't know what it, maybe because it's made of brick, or it was well seasoned, but everything came out really good.

LP: Ah, and so, one thing I forgot to ask you earlier, when we were talking about the caboose. What became of the caboose, and the pit, after you left?

AB: The caboose is now a, uh, tacqueria, and it's been open for quite a few years, so I think they must be doing okay.

LP: And they no longer use the barbecue pit there?

AB: I don't know to tell you the truth. I don't know if it's even still there or not.

LP: Thank you. Um, so, going back to the, the cooking of the meat a little bit. Um, what, did anything change, do you feel, about the taste of your meat, from moving from the pit to the smoker?

AB: I don't think it changed much, because we still use the same rub that, that we came up with, and we still use the mesquite wood. So, it's pretty much the same as it was there.

00:06:15

LP: And, how did you come up with the rub that you use?

AB: Experimenting, and, um seeing what other people did, and just adjusting it to my own tastes.

LP: I know you probably don't want to give the recipe, but could you tell us a little bit about the flavor, or some of the key ingredients?

AB: Oh, it's got some of the standard stuff in it, like chili powder, and of course salt and pepper, and, um, red pepper. Uh, it also has allspice in it, which gives it a little sweetness.

LP: So, what kinds of meat do you put that rub on?

AB: Put it on brisket, all the ribs, baby back ribs, and beef ribs, and country style ribs. Uh, we don't put it on chicken, that's just salt and pepper.

LP: And, are those all the types of meat you serve here, or do you serve additional meats?

AB: We have sausage and turkey; um, that's pretty much it.

LP: And so, um, what are some of your most popular menu items?

AB: Well, the baby back ribs are the most popular; we sell a lot of those. After that, we have a cut called a country style rib, which you won't find any place else really. It's cut more like a pork chop, so it's very thick. We sell a lot of those. Uh, those are our two biggest sellers, and then we go through a lot of hamburgers. We sell a lot of burgers, cause they're very good. They're cooked over, um, char-grill, uh very tasty. We sell a lot of them.

LP: And so, when did you come up with the country style cut, was that it? And how did you come up with, decide to start having that particular style of rib?

AB: We had that at, um, at the caboose. That's where I started that. And pretty much because, um, it was an easy cut to do, and, um an easy rib to keep around, did not have to cut it or anything like that. And it was unique, nobody else did it. And, um, one year we were in a rib cook-off, and, uh, it was the first year I had ever done anything like that. And I entered the country style ribs in as spare ribs. And they won. And, um, the next year, there was a rule that you couldn't enter those in *[laughs]* any more. Everyone else got mad, but I didn't care, I had the first place prize.

00:09:07

LP: And what was the name of this contest, and what year was it?

AB: It was called the Rib Ticklin' Affair. It benefited the mental health-mental retardation unit in town. And there were actually four categories in it: spare ribs, baby back ribs, let's see, beef ribs, and barbecue sauce, were the four categories. And, uh, I won all four. So, that's when I decided, I'll stick with barbecue.

LP: And has that contest continued?

AB: It went on for a few more years. And, um, I think we were in it three years in all. The second year we won two first place and two second place, and the third year, about, about the same, I think, and then. But unfortunately they don't have it anymore. I don't know what they do for their primary, uh, moneymaker now.

LP: And have you been involved in any other barbecue contests

AB: No, I haven't. Um, I would, I'd like to, those things are a lot of fun, but those people are fanatics *[laughs]*. And I stay busy enough here.

00:10:25

LP: And so, going back to your menu a little bit. We talked about some of the meat you serve. Um, what kind of sides do you have on your menu?

AB: We have the traditional sides: potato salad, cole slaw, pinto beans. Um, and they're all made in-house. We don't buy any of the, any of that pre-made.

LP: And how did you come up with the recipes, or kind of style, that you wanted to have for those sides?

AB: Again, I, I studied a lot of what other people were doing, and, and checked out a lot of recipes, and just, um, came up with my own formula, my own style, and stuck with that.

LP: And so what about desserts?

AB: Desserts, again, are pretty much all made in-house, except for the chocolate mousse pie, which we buy already made, and, and um, people really like it, so we have to keep buying it. Uh, other than that we have banana pudding, and, uh, bread pudding with a brandy sauce. And, uh, let's see, a sweet potato pecan pie.

LP: Those all sound delicious *[laughs]*. Um, and so do you distribute any of your products in any method than other, other than through your restaurant?

AB: For a while I was, um, trying to, uh, distribute my habanero sauce that I make, a really spicy habanero sauce. And, I went through a couple of bottlers, but I couldn't find one that got it exactly the way I wanted to, so I still make it, in small batches here, and I'll sell it out of here, but, uh, as far as distribution goes, uh, I haven't tried again. I have been thinking about the, the rub and the barbecue sauce, producing those, but, uh, right now I haven't had the time to pursue it.

LP: And what sorts of things do people use the habanero sauce on?

00:12:36

AB: Everything. I have people that use it on everything from eggs in the morning to, uh, to, you know, putting it on their steaks at night. I don't anybody that uses it for dessert yet though.

LP: And so, ah, do you still spend a lot of time in the kitchen, involved with the cooking yourself?

AB: Yeah, I do. I'm trying to get away from that, but it's, it's tough to do. I'm somewhat of a control freak, so I like to make sure everything's going okay. Uh, and it make it that much better when I actually do get some time off.

LP: And so what's a typical day like for you then?

AB: I usually get here somewhere around nine o'clock. And, um, check and see what, what the status of everything is. And then I'll go ahead and make some soup for the day, and I will just get ready for lunch. And I'll, I'll usually be here through lunch, and then I'll go home and do some work on the computer, and, uh, relax a little bit, and then come back in the evening. And, uh, I've got somebody who closes up for me and opens up for me, so I don't have to do either of those.

LP: Alrighty, so, going back to the beginning of the interview, you talked about how when you first came to Austin, and you were playing music, you really sought out barbecue places to play, um, do you feel like there's a particular connection between barbecue and music in this area?

00:14:15

AB: Oh, definitely. Uh, in fact I have music here at the rib house every night. Uh, it ties in really well, especially with something like bluegrass music, or acoustic singer/songwriter music. It fits in really good. And I, but I, and I, still get out and play music myself; it gets me away from here.

LP: And so, why do you think there is that connection, with the bluegrass music, and acoustic music?

AB: I don't know. Maybe because it, it takes so long to cook barbecue that you have to have something to do while it's smoking, so you pick some music.

LP: And, um, so, if you don't mind, uh talking a little bit about your own music now, and, and um kind of what you're doing?

AB: Okay. Um, I play bass with a, in a band uh called the Jon Emery Band. I've been playing with Jon for over twenty years now. And we play, we get out and play, about four, five times a month, here in Austin, and then, uh, once a year we try to get out and do a little, a little touring, which is nice, gets me out of here. We ah had a nice one this past summer, about three weeks ago we got back. We went uh two weeks in Europe, traveling around, playing music. It was fun.

LP: Did you find the opportunity to play at any barbecue restaurants in Europe?

AB: Well, it's kind of funny. Nope, I did play at a place that served some barbecue. It's called the rattlesnake saloon in Munich. And they had ribs on the menu, I didn't try them though; I was eating schnitzel at the time.

00:16:10

LP: And so, do you ever play here, at the Rib House?

AB: No, um, I'm not comfortable playing here. I'm always looking around and seeing, you know, why, why does that guy, why, how come that guy's iced tea glass is empty, why is that person standing at the door so long, and also, we're a bit loud for here, we're a big five-piece band.

LP: So, could you talk a little bit more about maybe some of the groups who play here regularly?

AB: Okay. Aw, let's see, I've got some people who have a weekly gig, like on every Monday night is Sarah Elizabeth Campbell. She's been doing that for a long time now. Every Tuesday night we have the Old Time Texas Fiddlers. They, they show up and sit in a circle and trade songs, and it's pretty informal. Every Wednesday now for a while it's been Shelley King and Carolyn Wonderland, and, uh, they've been drawing a, uh, good following, and, uh they're wonderful. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and, I try to mix it up. I'll have bands like the

Studebakers, who, they're a great band. They do Andrews Sisters-style music. Or I'll have bluegrass bands, like the Grazmatics, or the Sieker Band. Uh, singer-songwriters like George Enslie, um, and things like that. And then usually on Sundays, we have, uh, bluegrass music. We have a bluegrass jam on the, in the afternoon. Then in the evening we usually have bluegrass music, except for the third Sunday of the month, which is Western swing, with Bert Rivera and his band.

00:18:00

LP: Okay, and so, do you find that, ah, the crowd mainly comes both to eat barbecue, and to listen to music?

AB: Yeah, and it also depends on who is playing, too. A lot of bands, uh, draw a big crowd, and the people will come, and eat, and then just hang out and listen. Um, but we get a lot of people who come in for the food and then discover some new music while they're here.

LP: And, so, do you find that, that this is a particularly unique space for barbecue and music in this area, or is it a pretty, kind of, popular concept, um for, kind of, restaurants and music venues around Austin?

AB: It's, well, it's not real common, but there are other places that, that do it. I don't think they, they do it quite the same way though. A lot of places will have music out on the patio or something. We'll have it right, right in the dining room. Um, let's see, what else was I going to say? I had something I was going to say. Uh, but a lot of times, we ah, we'll be filled up, and

it'll be kind of half and half. People are here to see the music, or people are here to eat. It works out well.

LP: How long has having live music performed here at Artz Rib House been a part of Artz House? Was it from the beginning?

AB: Not from the very beginning. Uh, we didn't start off with music, um, I think we had probably been open at least six months, maybe a year, before I started getting some music in here, and I had it just once a week, something like that, and it was out here on the patio, and then it just got popular, and I moved it inside, and it just kept growing, and now it's every night of the week.

00:20:00

LP: And so, do you do any catering business at all?

AB: Yeah, we do a pretty good-sized catering business. We have a private room, in the back, that seats about 65 or so that we use for private parties, and we do off, uh, off-site catering a lot, uh, quite a few weddings and the rehearsal dinners. And now this time of year, uh, football tailgate parties. We did one, uh, last Saturday for Well's Fargo Bank up on, up on Trinity and Fifteenth Street, down in the middle of the action. Those are a lot of fun.

LP: And when you cater events do you typically cook the meat here and take it to the event, or cook at the event?

AB: We cook it here and bring it out there, because, just the nature of barbecue, it would take so long to cook it.

LP: Do you, in addition to your own, of course, um *[laughs]* and if you don't mind answering the question, do you have any other particularly favorite barbecue restaurants in town, or places you like to eat?

AB: I haven't been to a barbecue place in quite a while. I think the last barbecue restaurant I went to was in San Francisco, I think, and it was a Brazilian barbecue restaurant, and that's completely different. Ah, I did go to a barbecue restaurant last time I was up in Vermont visiting my mother, and it was okay. But usually around here, if I go out to eat, it's Mexican or Italian, something like that.

00:22:00

LP: I guess, thinking back to maybe when you have eaten barbecue in some other parts of the country, what do you notice as being different between, um, barbecue around here in Austin and Central Texas and barbecue other places?

AB: Well, I've had barbecue in, like, South Carolina, in that area, where it's mostly, ah, pork barbecue, and a lot of it's pulled pork, which they mix with a vinegar-ish, mustard-vinegar barbecue sauce, and usually served with cole slaw and a sandwich, and I really like that. It's different. I haven't been to Kansas City or Memphis, but I, I'd be interested in trying their barbecue.

LP: Okay, uh. I guess along with that, you mention that the particular type of rib that is one of your most popular items, um, do you have a particular favorite item yourself, on your menu here?

AB: I like the baby back ribs, um, that's usually what I'll eat here if I eat barbecue. I, I eat a lot of brisket here too. I'm a big fan of brisket. And sausage.

00:23:20

LP: And so, you did, um, mention how long barbecue takes to cook, um, and so, what is sort of the average cooking time for the meats that you serve?

AB: Well, let's see. Brisket, um, will generally take about ten hours. Uh, the ribs take, uh, around five hours or so. Chicken will take around three and a half hours. It, uh, it varies, it all depends on the thickness of the meat. But I'd say usually, for ribs and everything, it's about five hours.

LP: And so you talked about the large volume of your smoker. Do you have the different meats going at the same time in different parts of the smoker, or how do you work that out?

AB: Yeah, usually I'll have a bunch of things cooking at the same time, and it's, uh, the smoker is a big rotisserie-style smoker, so it just spins slowly around and that way the meats baste themselves as they cook. Uh, it's uh it's quite a, quite a thing. It's, they've come a long way since the old days, when you just had to keep constantly putting wood in, and paying attention to it all the time. And they're, they're pretty much automated now.

LP: So I just wanted to make sure we had this correct, I'm not sure we, um, talked about it before. Do you put the rub on before you cook, or after you cook, or during?

AB: You put the rub on before you cook. And generally we put it on, uh, at least, um, a couple of hours before, to give it a chance to penetrate the meat somewhat.

LP: All righty, well, um is there anything else you would like to talk about, or like to mention about barbecue, music, Artz Rib House, any of those things?

AB: Anything you want?

LP: Well, thank you very much for, ah for answering all the questions. And ah, this is, you don't have anything else that you want to add?

AB: Nothing that I can think of.

LP: Okay.

AB: Anything on your end?

LP: I think we're good.

AB: Got everything you need?

LP: All righty, um, so it's September fifth, 2007, and this has been an interview with Art Blondin of Artz Rib House.

END, Part 1

00:25:57

[We stopped the tape here. Art went to the kitchen and fixed me a plate of barbecue. I ate while he took care of some things, and when he came out to check on me, I asked if I could ask him a few more questions.]

BEGIN, Part 2

00:00:00

LP: This is a continuation of the interview with Art Blondin on the fifth of September 2007.

[Art talking to an employee in background]

AB: Thanks, Rick. Sure you don't want your picture taken?

LP: Just a couple of follow-up questions. Um, first of all, could you explain the differences between the ribs and where they come from on the parts of the animal?

AB: Okay, um, the baby back ribs are cut from around the loin of the pig, they're not from baby pigs like some people think. They're cut from up around the loin. The spare ribs are cut from around the belly. They go around the belly of the pig. And the, uh, country-style pork ribs are also cut from the loin area of the pig, the way baby backs are, except they're, uh, there's a spot where it's a lot meatier, and that's where they're cut from.

00:01:05

LP: And in terms of the beef ribs, what do you look for in terms of what makes a good beef rib?

AB: Well, the main thing is it's got to be big. The bigger ones are a lot juicier, and they're a lot more impressive-looking. Ah, occasionally we'll get some that are really small, and it's like the meat is pulled away from the bone, and it don't look good at all. So, we look mostly for size in beef ribs.

LP: Thank you. And what is the source of your meat? Do you purchase it all from the same place, or different sources?

AB: I was purchasing it all from the same place for a while, and then pork prices got way out of control, they started skyrocketing, so I shopped around. Now, we, we still shop around, and we try to find the best value and the best product. And, um, then maybe lock it in for a year at that price and we go from there. So we do shop around.

00:02:10

LP: Thank you. Um, and as I was just sampling your delicious barbecue *[coughs]*, I noticed that you had cloth napkins. Um, so how did you make the decision to have cloth napkins at your restaurant?

AB: I don't know really. It just happened—cloth napkins and checkerboard tablecloths seemed to go well, so uh that's what we do. And, also, when you're eating things like ribs, the cloth napkin certainly does absorb a lot more than the paper towels do.

LP: Um, and I'm guessing you have a lot of laundry that has to be done as barbecue is a bit of a messy, messy food?

AB: Our laundry bill is quite steep every week, yes. I wish I could cut it down.

LP: And to go back just briefly to, um, the music that you have played here at Artz Rib House, um, do you keep serving barbecue through the duration of the evening performances and after, or sometimes do the performances go longer than the barbecue goes?

00:03:21

AB: Our kitchen closes at ten o'clock every night, except Sunday, when it closes at nine. And the music, uh, finished at nine thirty, eight thirty on Sundays. So, the kitchen's open as long as the music's playing, and, ah, but we do end it early, which is good for a lot of the, ah, older folks in town, who want to go out and hear music and don't want to stay up until midnight.

LP: And that does lead me to one more question. What is your clientele like? Who comes to eat here and to listen to music?

AB: We get a very diverse clientele. We have a lot of the neighborhood folks that are regulars. We have people that drive down from north Austin, um, quite a bit to eat here. We even have people that come from as, from Lockhart and Luling, which are supposed to be barbecue capitals, but they like it here, so they make the drive. And we get quite a few, uh, university students. Um, a lot of south Austin people.

LP: And one final question. Um, now that I've sampled your sauce, um, I was wondering if you could talk just a little but more about it and what makes it unique and, um, award-winning, as it, as it has been?

AB: I don't know. We've—I did a lot of trial and error on the sauce, and, um, I wanted to keep something that was fairly simple so that my cooks could reproduce it without any problem. Ah, but it had to be flavorful so, it just, was uh, messed around a bit with the spices and got it the way I like it, and uh, I've been making it like that ever since.

LP: Okay, great. Thank you, um, and is there anything else you've thought of that you'd like to add?

AB: Not that I can think of. Uh, it's been a privilege talking to you, and I wish you good luck on, on this project.

LP: Thank you. Um, this is the end of the add-on to the interview with Art Blondin.

AB: First add-on.

LP: *[Laughs]*. Yeah.

END

00:05:36