

**ALEX & BETSY HITT**  
**Peregrine Farm - Graham, NC**

\* \* \*

Date: August 23, 2011  
Location: Hitt family home, Peregrine Farm - Graham, NC  
Interviewer: Kate Medley  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 1 hour  
Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

**[Begin Alex & Betsy Hitt Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Kate Medley:** I'll start by saying this Kate Medley interviewing Alex and Betsy Hitt on August 23, 2011 at their home in Alamance County near Graham, North Carolina.

**00:00:18**

**Betsy Hitt:** You got it. *[Laughs]*

**00:00:23**

**KM:** And I'll start by getting Betsy, if you'll introduce yourself and tell us who you are and your birthday and what you do?

**00:00:32**

**BH:** My name is Betsy Hitt. And I am a flower grower primarily in Alamance County, North Carolina. My birthday is December 16, 1956. And my husband and I have been here on this farm since 1981. And *[Laughs]*—

**00:01:03**

**KM:** Your husband is who?

**00:01:03**

**Alex Hitt:** Alex Hitt and my birthday is August 15, 1956, so I just turned 55. And we have been here—we bought the place in '81, planted our first crops in '82—straight out of college.

00:01:25

**KM:** And who wants to take on the task of introducing the farm?

00:01:34

**AH:** How do you want it—just what we do? Well when we first started it was all pick your own berries, blackberries and raspberries and that was the business plan. And then as we realized that was not going to pay the bills, partly because we had whole demographic change happening in the world where people were going from single income to double income families and no one could come out and pick 20 pounds of berries.

00:02:01

So we started selling at Farmers Market and we were encouraged to sell at Farmers Market by some local folks and so in 1986 we started at the Carrboro Farmers Market and it was sort of an exploratory phase. We were—the first vegetables we had grown and we had berries obviously and we had a few flowers. And what happened was the flowers were the tail that wagged the dog for a while and because people were excited by it and not so excited about squash. And so we quickly expanded in flowers and in vegetables as well but the flowers went to two acres in a short period of time. And about at the same time as when Weaver Street Market opened and we started selling to them in '88 and flowers and other vegetables and things grew from there.

00:02:57

**KM:** And tell us Alex about your growing up years.

00:03:05

**AH:** Well my growing up years, farm- and food-wise revolved around my father being an intense gardener and so we grew up in the garden, both ornamentals and food. And my mother being a really great cook and we ate everything that we grew. And so it was a classic thing where we ate three meals or at least two meals a day together, breakfast and dinner, and it always revolved around food but it was Southern food because my folks are from Arkansas and Tennessee. And so it always revolved around all the classic Southern dishes.

00:03:44

And then as we moved quite a bit to New England and other places, mom learned to grow, cook other things but it was always good fresh food that we were real interested in.

00:03:55

**KM:** And what specifically were they growing and what were y'all eating?

00:03:59

**AH:** You know it was a lot of yellow squash, a lot of collards, a lot of kales, a lot of greens, a lot of tomatoes. Mostly warm season crops; there was not a lot of cool season other than the kale and collards and stuff. There was not a lot of lettuce and that kind of thing going on. It was a salad thing or a tomato, cucumber, onion sort of combination.

00:04:26

**KM:** And did you grow up thinking I want to become a farmer?

00:04:31

**AH:** Not really. I mean we—both Betsy and I but I grew up wanting to work outdoors. And for a long time I thought it would be in the outdoor industry or for the Federal government doing forestry or something like that. And then it was in college when I realized that maybe I wasn't suited to one of those Federal jobs and ended up changing my major to soils. So my degree is in Soils and Horticulture. But we even then weren't really clear on what it would be. And it was just the bare emergence of small local farms and the food, business the way we know it today and restaurants wanting local stuff and so it was—we had to feel it out. It was not real clear as to how it would work but we did want to live in the country and make our living in the country and not drive into town to make a living. So that was always sort of what drove the urgency to make a living at it.

00:05:34

**KM:** And how about you Betsy?

00:05:38

**BH:** Pretty much a similar story. I have a morbid fear of being in confined closed spaces for very long, so I need to be outside. And I also had absolutely no plan as to what I wanted to do after college other than I didn't want to work in an office. So when Alex had the idea of the farm and I thought well that'll be outdoors so that's how I got here. *[Laughs]*

00:06:11

**KM:** Growing up did your parents farm or garden or tell us a little bit about your growing up years?

00:06:17

**BH:** My mother's family was the most influential. My grandmother was a Scottish immigrant and she literally lived through the woods behind my parents' house. And she always had a garden. She had chickens. And pretty much I lived with her; my mother work and I stayed with my grandmother during the day until I was in school. And we would do garden things. And my mother always had a garden and always canned and pickled and all that. And we would go on forays to pick wild strawberries and wild blackberries and so that all seems pretty natural, although I'm really glad I don't have to pick wild strawberries anymore. *[Laughs]*

00:07:14

**KM:** And who wants to tell us about how y'all met?

00:07:21

**AH:** Some wild drinking party. *[Laughs]*

00:07:22

**KM:** What was that?

00:07:22

**AH:** Some wild drinking party at Utah State I'm sure. But we both went to school at Utah State. And we were both out there to be in the Natural Resources Education—area. Betsy's degree is actually in Forestry and I started in Watershed Science. And so we were—there was not a lot of out-of-state students in Utah so it was fairly easy to run into those that were from out-of-state. And so we met probably in Ecology 101 or some class like that.

00:07:54

And we knew each other for the whole four years almost of college. But didn't really become a pair until the last year. And by then I had sort of started to really work on this plan for a small farm—but we decided that as much as we loved the West that partly because our families were east and partly because we knew that to find land with irrigation water in Utah would have been difficult and expensive. So we started looking for a place where the climate would allow us to grow whatever we wanted and so Northern North Carolina or Southern Virginia you know was an ideal climate to grow just about anything it looked like. And then we started looking at markets and thought well, looks like North Carolina, maybe Greensboro, maybe the Triangle would be a really great market. And so we—my folks had actually moved here when I was in college. I had never lived here. So we had an opportunity come and have a place to work from to sort of check it out.

00:09:00

So I moved back first because Betsy thought she had to finish school. Turned out she was already done. And so I moved back first and got on the ground and started looking for land and seeing what prices were like and what markets were like and we realized that actually it was—the Triangle was the better market. And so she finally moved down six months later and we started a business plan and started working on how we were going to do this thing.

00:09:28

**KM:** What was the scene in the Triangle like at that point food-wise, farm-wise?

00:09:33

**AH:** It was primitive. There was no essentially no white tablecloth restaurants. There were no specialty food stores like Weaver Street or Whole Foods or anything like that in 1981. Nineteen eighty is when we got here. And the Farmers Markets were just nascent. The Carrboro Farmers Market started in '79 and so it was really tiny and there were really no other Markets around—hardly. There was some—you know some corner lot things but nothing really organized.

00:10:10

And even the Carrboro Market, the Chapel Hill Carrboro Market had sort of died out from what it had been in the '30s and '40s and '50s and had been sort of resuscitated in the late '70s. So it was early on and so it was hard to tell exactly what shape the food scene would take. You know the best dining in Chapel Hill would have been probably the Carolina Inn. Otherwise it was going to be a barbeque or something like that.

00:10:38

And then in '80—well Bill Neal had opened La Residence out at the Fearington House in '79 or '78 and so there was that. And then he moved into town in the early '80s and that's when Ben and Karen Barker kind of showed up on the scene and but really there was nothing—even Crooks Corner didn't exist really until about '85 or so. And so you know we were at the very early nubs of what this thing might look like.

00:11:19

**KM:** Betsy, do you want to tell us about first impressions as a newcomer to the South?

00:11:26

**BH:** I didn't want to move here. [*Laughs*] As born and raised in the New York metropolitan area I was convinced that it would be a horribly racist society. And that didn't appeal to me. And

I knew it would be hot in the summer. And Alex tried to dissuade me telling me that only South Carolina was hot but he was wrong. **[Laughs]** And it took me a little while to get the hang of it but really the old-timers that I met in our immediate area couldn't tell. They didn't know where Utah was and we just said we moved here from Utah. And they couldn't tell that I was from New Jersey. And so we became friends and they were really pretty much just like the best of the country people that I knew from my youth, so it worked out. I like to consider myself naturalized at this point. **[Laughs]**

**00:12:46**

**KM:** Do y'all want to tell us about finding this plot of land and describe this land to someone who has never been to North Carolina; where are we?

**00:12:59**

**AH:** Well we looked a long time for this piece of land. We initially had another piece of land about 20 miles away that we thought we were going to buy and we waited to close on it for six months and then it turned out that the fellow who was selling it didn't have a clear title to it. So we started over again.

**00:13:21**

And it turns out it was one of those godsend things that we would have been out of business. Had we tried to farm on that piece of land it would have killed us because the soil wasn't as good and the lay of the land wasn't as good and it would have been a lot of work. So we found this piece of land which is 2,000 feet from the Haw River on the hills over the Haw River and we're in an area of North Carolina that is rolling land above the coastal plain. So it's just some miles west of what they call the fall line where all the rivers drop down to the coastal

plain. And so it's rolls, beautiful rolling land with huge oaks and hickories and beaches and a little higher elevation, but yet good soil.

**00:14:11**

And so we looked a long time and because my degree was in Soils we looked hard at good soil because that's the hardest thing to buy in North Carolina because a lot of the soil is not great agricultural land. So it took us a year and a half to find this piece of land and we feel really fortunate that we found it both in its beauty but in the quality of the soil, the quality of the water that we have to irrigate with, good neighbors, good seclusion. We're sort of not at the end of the road but we're not going to be encroached upon any time soon. So you know it was important to us to have all those qualities, and it's only 15 miles from town.

**00:14:53**

Because our initial business plan was pick-your-own all the studies had said that your customers came from within 15 miles or a 20-minute drive of the farm. And so we literally drew a circle around Chapel Hill and looked for land within that circle and we we're at the outside edge of that circle. But now that we're not—even though we're not a pick-your-own anymore it makes it very convenient for us to go to Market or to service the restaurants or to service the grocery stores as opposed to some of our other fellow farmers who are an hour out or an hour and a half out. For us it makes business a lot easier.

**00:15:29**

**KM:** And could one of y'all reflect on those early years, maybe the first year or two of farming out here?

**00:15:38**

**BH:** It was not easy for us. We started farming in 1981 and we had no money to put it mildly. We lived for the first six months—six, seven months in a tent, which we pitched right next to the tractor. And we had no running water for 400 and some odd days so it was quite you know—bathing in the pond, boiling water to wash dishes, all the joys of uncivilized life [*Laughs*]. But you know when you're young and resilient you can do anything, so we did and actually it wasn't unpleasant at all for us. It was hard to explain to other people but you know for us it was just well, of course this is what you do.

00:16:40

**AH:** It was an adventure.

00:16:41

**BH:** It was an adventure.

00:16:41

**AH:** For us it was an adventure.

00:16:43

**BH:** And we knew that sooner or later everything would be fine. We didn't know that it was going to take quite as long as it took for everything to be fine, but that's what it is. [*Laughs*]

00:16:55

**KM:** And what was going on at the farm in those early years?

00:17:01

**BH:** We had planted in blackberries and raspberries and which require minimal amounts of equipment and minimal we could do. We were clearing land to put in more berries and asparagus and we cleared a two-acre field first that we were going to put in blueberries and then started clearing a—I guess it's about another two acres that we were going to put in asparagus. So there was a lot of chainsaw work, a lot of brush-burning and a lot of rock picking for the first years, and in addition to pruning and harvesting and selling the berries.

00:17:58

**AH:** It was a lot. This piece of land had nothing on it. It wasn't a well, a building; there was nothing here, so on top of planting stuff and putting in irrigation and doing all that kind of thing we were building equipment sheds and the house and greenhouses and so that it was a constant process and the first 10 years of sort of infrastructure development because there was no infrastructure. And so once we got past that hurdle then it became a little easier to concentrate on just growing stuff and then figuring out better—both the market and what we did well.

00:18:38

**KM:** How did y'all get to the Market? How did you find the Market and start going there?

00:18:47

**BH:** George Graves, he was an old-timer who lived down the road and he would come by to check in and see how we were doing and trying to talk us into one enterprise or another that he was doing. He at one point ran the country store. He made moonshine. Lord only knows what else he did. But he would come by and tell me that I was a fool to be trying to sell berries pick-

your-own; that we needed to pick them and bring them down to the Farmers Market and we would be on the right road. And so finally he convinced us and we started going to see what the Market was like. And slowly, very slowly, most because of our inability to produce anything much—we got going at the Market. And as we learned, the Market grew and things got better. But it was definitely George.

00:19:57

**AH:** Yeah.

00:19:58

**KM:** And earlier you were telling me about the learning curve of going to Market.

00:20:04

**BH:** Oh well, we would go down—I think the first time we went to Market we had like six pounds of squash and I don't think we even managed to get beets together. But oh, I know what you're talking about. The first time I went to Market on George's advice I went at 10 o'clock in the morning and the Market was over. There was nobody in the parking lot and George told me later that I needed to get there earlier. So I went back there in a couple weeks at 9:30 or 9 o'clock and it was the same thing. And it was completely vacant, and finally I got there at like 8 o'clock in the morning and there were actually people there doing commerce. And so that's how he won me over. *[Laughs]*

00:20:58

**KM:** And where were you Alex?

00:21:00

**AH:** Well what happened was even though this was my grand idea, someone had to make money and so the first year I was on the phone while we were building the first part of the house and doing some infrastructure and getting the berries in and stuff. And then I went off the farm; I was painting contractor and so I worked in Chapel Hill in construction while Betsy was on the farm full-time. She worked in the restaurant business actually in Chapel Hill at three or four different places in Chapel Hill including Farrington House and then quit that and came to the farm and was here. And I was of course was back here part-time and nights and weekends. And I ran the painting business until '89 and finally the farm was up and running and making enough money that I could quit. And so we were both on the farm full-time in '90 and that was when we really started to springboard into more stuff and different stuff because by then we had sort of a feel for the Market. We had been at the Carrboro Market for five years by then and so had a feel for what customers wanted and what our piece of ground would grow and what we liked to grow and we were still doing berries, but moving into vegetables and cut flowers and expanding different things. So by the time I got back to the farm in '90 we were really ready to take advantage of everything we had learned in the previous eight years.

00:22:34

**KM:** And compare and contrast the Market in the '80s and to present day.

00:22:44

**AH:** Well it's bigger. I think the first year we were there—there was maybe at best 30 vendors. And it was a short Market; it was April through November. A lot of vendors would be there for

10 or 12 weeks, 13 weeks because it was sort of a warm season crop Market—maters, taters, and beans we called it.

**00:23:12**

And I mean we weren't the only ones but as the younger farmers, the new first generation farmers came in that's when people started growing lettuce and arugula and different things that no one ever heard of in the South or weren't used to having at a Farmers Market in the South. And so the Market expanded and the Market finally filled out into what we think of now as the Market as 80 selling spaces, somewhere around 92 or 93 finally if all spaces were filled.

**00:23:50**

And so it's been a change of both scale—of who the farmer is, who the vendor is, because obviously not all the vendors are farmers. It was primarily an older either retired professional who was gardening or farming on the side or actually an older—farmers never retire, but an older farmer in their 60s or 70s or 80s who would bring stuff to Market, whereas today while we still have some of those folks it's increasing populated by young farmers in their 20s and 30s. And we're actually in our 50s getting to be sort of older rats in the barn now having been around a long time. And so it has changed in sort of that demographic.

**00:24:45**

And then the kind of stuff sold at Market has changed. You know in the early years when we did the same it was really maters, taters, and beans. And we actually grew potatoes and beans and don't grow a single one anymore because there was so many there you couldn't sell them all. You couldn't make any money on it. And now that a lot of those folks are gone that used to grow all that stuff there's vendors now coming back and growing potatoes and beans that never did it before or had sworn them off. We still don't grow them but other folks do. So there's always a change in product mix.

00:25:21

**KM:** And what's hot now? I mean what was selling at the Market last Saturday?

00:25:25

**AH:** Well last Saturday you know we're in the change of seasons now from summer to early fall which means there's a little bit of greens and radishes and a few things showing up and the last of the tomatoes really. There will be tomatoes there for a while but the last of the volume tomatoes are there. We're moving into major pepper season. It's going to start looking like winter squash and sweet potatoes and that sort of fallish kind of stuff here pretty quick. There's almost no sweet corn left, so it's that real change of season.

00:26:01

One of the real major changes at Market over the last five to eight years has been meat. And that's really—when folks ask me what is new at Market or what's happening at Market, we had no meat vendors. There were no meat vendors in the '80s and almost essentially none in the '90s. And then all of the sudden, we started having folks bringing beef down and pork down and lamb down and now of course chicken and turkeys and different poultry. And you know now there's probably—it's not as obvious because it's harder to display at Market but there's probably eight or ten pork vendors at Market now and three or four or five beef vendors. And so that's really become a thing that has sort of changed the face of the Market in some way and has sort of helped propel the year-round Market, because obviously it's a little harder to have produce in January. But it's you can have meat down there, so the meat vendors are there year-round and which is pushing the produce vendors to do a better job at having stuff year-round. So

that's been something that has really changed how the Market has looked in the last 10 years certainly but really in the last five I think.

**00:27:23**

**BH:** It is sort of unfortunate but I think it's easier to find arugula at the Farmers Market now than okra. And you know these things are sort of cyclical and all the—you know when we started all the young farmers started growing arugula and broccoli rabe and some non-traditional Southern vegetables because the people that knew what they were doing [*Laughs*] already, the old-timers were growing the maters, taters, and corn. And so we couldn't compete with them, so we started growing all this weird stuff and now we're old and we're still growing all the weird—what was the weird stuff and now the traditional stuff has gotten to be kind of hard to find—okra, mizuna, upland crest, that kind of thing that have sort of disappeared.

**00:28:16**

**AH:** Well and there's been a change in customer too because Chapel Hill and Carrboro was a small—it was a university town but it was populated by Southerners. And now because of the Research Triangle Park and because of the University there is a huge influx of folks both from New England and from the Upper Midwest. And increasingly folks from Colorado and California and New Mexico identify themselves to us every day at Market; so there's definitely a customer base for stuff different than the traditional Southern crops.

**00:28:58**

**KM:** I want to take a step back for a second and I want you guys to introduce the Carrboro Market to someone who has never been. What does it look like and who's there and what's the feel of it?

**00:29:19**

**AH:** You want me to do that? Well today if you've never been one of the interesting things about the Market is it's farmer-run, farmer-controlled, but at the same time it's a public private partnership with the Town of Carrboro. And so it's held on town property, next to Town Hall and they built us a beautiful facility in the early '90s. But it's still the same sort of 80-selling spaces, and so if you come today it'll be really bustling. There will be—depending on the time of year and—if there's a special event or not, but anywhere from 3,000 to 6,000 people down there on a Saturday morning from 7:00 to noon. And the Market will be packed with vendors, all the way around in a circle. It's a huge circle with vendors on either side and so people wander the big loop and they can sort of scope out what's there and then decide if they want to buy tomatoes from this person and peppers from that person or lettuce from whoever. And so what has happened is it's gotten so big and it's unusual; there are Markets around the country that are this big but not a lot.

**00:30:33**

And so the customers have adopted their favorite farmers and they go and buy from them, you know, first and then they go out and look for other things to fill in their baskets that they're thinking about eating for the week. And so it has become really the Town Square in a big way that it didn't used to be. It used to be sort of held in a parking lot and out behind some of the buildings and while people did come down, customers to sort of visit with each other and buy food it was really more sort of a let's buy food and go home. And now it's really much more sort

of that community gathering place where not only do the farmers get to see each other which they don't see each other—other than once a week, but the customers come down and they may see each other at work during the week but it's sort of a different milieu and they get to see their neighbors that maybe work at different places or do different things. And it's really—we feel like it has really become sort of the center of the community in a certain way.

**00:31:37**

**BH:** You know you see people's children from when they're infants until they're graduated from college, which is kind of remarkable. And you see the shifts in the population. You see more Hispanic folks showing up at Market now than we did a few years ago. And you also see things like all the Muslims disappearing after 09/11 and they're slowly coming back, but you—a big international population generally runs through the Market because they're used to shopping at Market.

**00:32:27**

And so it's kind of a microcosm of what's going on in the bigger world.

**00:32:36**

**KM:** I want to talk about the Market from sort of a business person's standpoint. You guys have chosen it as your primary outlet for your product. Sort of tell us about that decision, like how did the finances of it work out?

**00:32:56**

**AH:** Well the first obvious thing that a lot of farmers, the reason they sell at Farmers Market is because it's retail prices. And so if you're working on a small acreage like we are you have to get

all the bang for the buck you can. And so if you sell to restaurants that's a certain discount off of retail and then if you sell to grocery stores that's yet a further bite off of retail and so you have to sell a whole lot more to make the same amount of money. So that's the first thing.

**00:33:25**

The other is you can bring either smaller amounts of stuff and sell it or you can be less organized in your production and just show up when you have it, whereas if you're selling particularly to a grocery store, if you say I'm going to have X for you, you better have it on that date and you better have the number of cases you said you're going to have. And so there's a pressure there to perform that you don't have at the Farmers Market.

**00:33:59**

And so a lot of farmers will feel more comfortable in that situation particular as they're learning to grow and produce stuff; it's easier for them to have just what they have and sell it.

**00:34:13**

And then for us, one of the reasons we were over 50-percent wholesale originally in the Farmers Market but as the Farmers Market sort of developed and we saw the potential there, the other thing we realized is that we liked the arena of Farmers Market. We liked the theater involved. We liked the customer relationships involved. We liked the immediate feedback we got from our customers whether our stuff was good or bad or they would like a different color or a different size or whatever it was; we got that instant feedback.

**00:34:47**

And some farmers don't either like to talk to their customers or they're not comfortable in making displays or pricing or whatever it is. They just want to grow it and get rid of it and not worry about it. And so those folks probably sell more into wholesale or different things like that.

But we really like that one-on-one customer service that we can do. And so there's a number of reasons that for us it has really worked out to be the thing we're most comfortable in.

**00:35:16**

At the same time we don't want to have all our eggs in one basket; even though 70-percent of our business is at two Markets a week we still do some wholesale and we still do restaurants partly because we want to be diversified in our marketing and partly because we get different input and different ideas both from the restaurant side and from the store side. They'll come to us with different ideas of things to grow and it turns out that it may be a great Farmers Market crop but we wouldn't have thought about it unless they suggest to us that we try to grow something. And so we still want to have that difference, but we want to maximize what we're doing at the Farmers Market.

**00:35:59**

**BH:** I would say that it's the talking to people is fun; that we like that customers are great entertainment and you know they—we have regular folks that you know we miss when they go on vacation [*Laughs*]. And the commitment-phobe track in my personality really appreciates the Farmers—your ability to go in and just be what you are that day and that's good enough.

[*Laughs*]

**00:36:40**

**KM:** Tell us about your regulars.

**00:36:43**

**AH:** They've changed over time.

00:36:44

**BH:** They do; they have changed over time. One of my favorites happens to be our Market Manager's boyfriend Ben. We knew first his grandmother, who used to come every week with her daughter, Ben's mother and it was such a remarkable relationship. The mother and daughter relationship was so remarkable that you just noticed it and they were—they are—were both lovely people and we just loved to talk to her. Harriett was—we'd talk gardening and all kinds of stuff with her all the time and we watched Harriett get weaker and you know just generally lose power. And that was going on at the same time that Alex and I were having the same thing happen with our parents. So we would commiserate with Sissy about what was going on.

00:37:53

And then Harriett finally passed away after a long period and we cried when Sissy came by and told us. And then a few years later we—and Sissy's daughter used to wait on us at a restaurant all the time. We didn't know these people were related really and then Sarah came along and introduced us to her boyfriend Ben. And we started putting two and two together and realized that Ben had been one of the little children that was running around at the parties when he was four years old and we were in our you know 20s. And so it's this—you know there's just a crazy connection that is three generations which is pretty good when you've lived in an area for 30 years.

00:38:49

**KM:** Watching the community grow up?

00:38:51

**BH:** Yeah.

**00:38:52**

**KM:** Who else—by name or by personality?

**00:38:58**

**AH:** Well you have customers; you have regulars that are serious food buyers. And so you may not know them quite as well in a personal relationship like that but you know what they eat. And so we identify with those folks. And so when they come up there we go oh, we got that—whatever—that tomato you really like or we've got that eggplant you really like. And so you develop these relationships around time with those. And we have both customers that are that way and you have time of day customers. They only come—they're the early morning shoppers or they're the middle of the day or particularly the ones you don't like or the late-day shoppers because they always want some bargain.

**00:39:48**

But we have some folks; we have really have great relationships with around food. And some that are more relationships with them because of who they are. They may not actually say buy a lot from us but they love to come to Market and they love to check in and see what's going on and talk the weather and politics or anything else that might happen. But we've got some really—Betsy has both some really great flower customers who come and patronize us every week and we hold special things for them. And I have produce customers on my side who—there's stuff that may never get on the table that they'll get in their bag before they leave the Market. So you know it's a cross-section that way.

**00:40:39**

And as Betsy said, and now we're getting the children of customers that gives us hope that there's life for the Market in the future you know because for a long time we saw an aging of the Market in a way that we were a little concerned were young people eating anything. And now it's quite a bit of a younger crowd that we're excited about.

00:41:06

**KM:** And how do chefs fit into the picture?

00:41:11

**BH:** They are their own little microcosm. *[Laughs]* There are very, very different approaches as to how they buy and what they buy and it's just like the way they run the restaurants. We deal with one, who will remain nameless who is very ordered and very precise. And it's you get an order and it's very specific. It says I want six of these, three of those, two of these, and five of those but I only want three that are straight and the others I want curly you know. It's just that way and if you ask why, it will be explained. All will be explained and it will make perfect sense but it does seem a bit precise.

00:42:04

And then we have others that say literally what do you want to get rid of which is not our favorite question because we want to get rid of it all but not that way. We want it to go to a loving home. So—and they'll just—different source of restaurants; some are very, very refined and others are more rustic. But it's interesting to talk to them particularly the more interested they are in food the more fun they are to talk to. If they talk about—because we do grow, I mean we taste this stuff and we grow some of the things for specific reasons. We grow particular tomatoes for sauce and not just the average you know sort of regular Pace tomatoes. We grow

actually three others and I'm still waiting for someone to say oh, I like that one for this dish but I haven't gotten there yet. Someone will. I'll get it.

**00:43:17**

So you know it depends on how into it they are, but the more into it they are the better.

**00:43:28**

**AH:** See the effect on the Market of the chefs is the same effect they have on us individually as a business in that they're usually on the cutting edge of the latest vegetable or fruit because they had talked to some chef cohort in California that said oh I'm getting such and such, and such and such, or they travel or they read a cookbook or something about—in Europe and heard about some new thing and so they'll come to us and go, can you grow white turnips? I go well I don't know; I can try. And so it gives us new things to try to sort of keep expanding what's available at Market. And so they—it's at a level where you don't have to put in a whole field of it. You can put in 50-feet or 100-feet or 200-feet and see if it grows and you don't have a big commitment in time and money into growing it if it's a total failure.

**00:44:33**

And so I think the chefs have helped push the Market community into some directions and crops that they would have never thought of before if it was just sort of thinking about what you had seen in the grocery store.

**00:44:47**

**KM:** Give us an example of one of those crops that you're growing now.

**00:44:50**

**AH:** That we're growing now—well the one directly an old one that we've been growing for some years now but—and it's not ubiquitous at the Market but there is a white Japanese turnip that particularly in the South where we all know what turnips and turnip greens are it's not what anyone thinks of. It's a very tender and very sweet turnip that people use in salads primarily. And now it's out at almost every booth at Market. But somewhere back in the '90s Ben Barker from Magnolia Grill came and asked us if we could grow white turnips? I said I don't know; I'll try. And so we turned out we could find seed and we could figure it out and it took us a year or so to sort of get it down and it turns out that it's one of the most popular crops now at Market.

**00:45:38**

There are crops that we thought might be good ideas and we would grow and take to them to try and they were like oh, I really like that. Grow more of that. Or they'd go oh no, that's horrible; I never want to eat that again. So there's an influence on sort of taste and stuff that our palates aren't sophisticated enough for or we're not really quite sure how to use it but they are. Broccoli rabe is one of those; rapini, we were like the first ones in the area to grow rapini and—because we had been exposed to it somehow and the restaurants guided us on what the right size was and the harvest stage and post-harvest and that kind of thing.

**00:46:20**

And then there's things that we jointly arrive at; we have traveled with some of our chef friends, particularly the Barker(s) to Italy and Spain and other places and have sort of jointly tried a pepper or something and said wow that would be really great. I wonder if we could you know smuggle some seeds back to the States and do that. And so we have particularly now some peppers and tomatoes and some melons that we have sort of jointly found. And so it's a level of sort of understanding and trust and relationship that goes on that I don't—that could happen outside of the Market, but because the Market is sort of as vibrant as it is with lots of vendors

and lots of product and lots of varieties that their minds are jogged by stuff and our ideas are—are sort of coalesced by seeing what other farmers are doing. And so I think the Market allows for an atmosphere for that sort of exchange to go on.

**00:47:25**

**KM:** What differentiates the Carrboro Market? There are lots of Farmers Markets in the area now.

**00:47:37**

**AH:** Well we still think there's a number of core operating principles that the Market has run on from the very beginning. One is that it's producer-only that you can only sell what you grow. And we take it even further at Carrboro which a lot of Markets don't do and that not only can you only sell the stuff you grow but you the farmer have to be there selling it. And many Markets allow an employee just to come down and sell. And we've thought all along for a number of reasons that it was vital for the business owner, the person whose feet is to the fire to be down there representing their product because you can get any produce person in any grocery store to be ignorant and not know what a variety is or how you would use it or where it came from and how it was grown. And that would be the same if you send just an employee to Market. So we think it's important that I represent my produce and I can say well this seed came from so and so and my mother grew it or this is how we use it or—and so that the customer really has faith in the quality and the originality of the material. And it's that been that way from the beginning—grower only.

**00:48:54**

The other is that it's farmer-owned, farmer run and farmer controlled. Many, many Markets now are started by the Chamber of Commerce or a community group or a group of housewives that wanted some produce in their neighborhood. You know there's reasons other than actually having a Farmers Market to sell produce that benefits both the farmers and the community. And so the Market has been run by the members for the members all these years, so there's a seven-member Board of Directors and the Directors are elected from the membership by the membership, so that the decisions that are made make sense to farmers and not because the Chamber of Commerce wants a Market and then all of the sudden on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July they're not going to have a Market because it's inconvenient for the Town.

**00:49:43**

And that's a hard thing to do. It's very hard to run a Farmers Market and it's hard to get farmers who are busy and don't live in town to serve on Boards and serve on committees and make decisions and you know it would be a lot easier to just let the Extension Agent run the Market or let the Economic Development Officer in town run the Market. And so we think that we have a real vested interest in making it the best Market it possibly can be. Yet at the same time protecting or looking out for the interest of the farmers, which is why it's there. And then we have other smaller rules like you have to be within a 50-mile radius of Carrboro to sell. And some Markets have radius rules, 70 miles, 75 miles, 100 miles, 150 miles, but 50 in the piedmont of North Carolina turns out to be sort of climatically a level playing field. And so if I work really hard to grow an early tomato and someone from 150 miles away could bring tomatoes from South Carolina then why should I work so hard to do that? I'll just let the—you know so—but now everyone is within 50 miles. They're all pretty—there's some folks in little bit warmer areas and a little bit colder area but it puts us all on a level playing field so that if we work really hard

to grow the very finest produce we can or flowers that we can and we all show up at Market together we're all sort of equal. No one has an upper hand.

**00:51:17**

And so the Market is run a lot of times—rules are made and decisions are made in that sort egalitarian, we want everyone to have the same opportunity to make a living or to sell their produce at Market and not let some bigger growers have an advantage or some people from farther away to have an advantage. And so we think that's real important. Now that limits us in some ways. We don't have a whole lot of tree fruit at Market because we're in a very bad frost pocket for spring frosts here in Central North Carolina. And so it's very hard to grow peaches and apples and pears and that kind of thing because they lose the blossoms to the spring frosts. And so there are some things that we don't have but pretty much we say if you can grow it within 50 miles of Carrboro you will see it here. And pretty much anything that can grown—now some of it may not be in volume, but our growers are pretty ingenious and they have learned to grow some pretty amazing stuff that no one thought could be done here, and so it's a challenge but it's that level equal footing that we try to allow everyone to have.

**00:52:31**

**KM:** Do y'all want to tell us about some of the challenges that the Market—you talked some about this, but that you guys are wrestling with in 2011 as the Market is growing?

**00:52:45**

**BH:** It's always hard to figure out who should be the new vendors when we have an opening. What direction—because you are steering the Market. Depending on what sort of product they have to sell, you're pointing things in one direction or another. And you want to maintain a

vibrant and interesting Market. You want everybody that does something that's unique to have a space at Market. So recently—in the last five or six years I guess there's been sort of expansion in the number of people doing value-added—what we lovingly called value-added products which is bakers and chutney makers and pickles and all that sort of thing, which are—they add a tremendous amount to the Market both because of what they bring with them, they bring all sorts of different cultures and different ways of thinking about how you eat and what you eat and all that and but a lot of people don't understand that they have a place at a Farmers Market; that they're using locally produced things, products, and to make their own products and you know this is a legitimate item for sale at a Farmers Market.

**00:54:31**

So there's a—you have to do a little convincing and show them that it's not going—nothing bad will happen [*Laughs*]; that it all adds to the atmosphere and the experience.

**00:54:52**

**AH:** You have to show, you know, the older vendors.

**00:54:54**

**BH:** The older vendors or the vendors that just—you know not all the vendors think about the Market as a whole. They think about their own—what's on their table and it's not just what's on your table. It's what's on everybody's table. So that's been sort of a challenge here and there.

**00:55:23**

**KM:** There are a fair number of young farmers at the Carrboro Market. What would be your advice to somebody who is just getting started or what is your advice to people just getting started?

**00:55:35**

**AH:** Well we tell them in general in farming if they have the opportunity to start small, figure out what they do well and then expand on that. Now sometimes at Market that means they don't have enough of anything to really sell if they're too small. So there's a balance there. But if they can learn early on what their soil grows well, what they grow well, what will sell for them and then they can grow a whole lot more of it once they get that down.

**00:56:13**

And so the ones that have done the best we think at Market are those ones that have had the luxury of starting at a quarter-acre or a half-acre and sort of really getting it down and then expanding out. Now some folks don't have that luxury. They have to make x-amount of money and so they have to jump right in with a couple acres and usually they get overwhelmed and we think their business is probably hurt by it in the short-term and maybe they'll recover.

**00:56:38**

The other thing that we encourage all new vendors to do but the young ones is to be original and to be authentic because the customers will see right through it. If they are just growing an eggplant because their neighbor grew an eggplant and they saw people standing in line to buy it from then they are well he must be making money and I'm going to grow that one, but they don't know what it is, they don't like eggplant, they don't know how to cook it, they—you know you need to—you need to own it.

**00:57:11**

And so the folks who do best at Market are the ones who have real genuine interest in whatever it is. It could be the orchid guy. It could be April with chutneys. It could be me with heirloom tomatoes. It could—you know it doesn't really matter but you have to be the authority, you have to own it, you have to—because the customers know and they're going to come and buy from those folks that they think really are the ones that are telling them the real story about that product. And so they're going to want to know you know particularly if it's your family product. You know my grandmother raised this squash and we saved seed and this is how we do it and the best way to cook it is this and that's who is going to be successful at the Market.

**00:57:57**

And so to be authentic and original I think is harder and harder to do but there are specialties that you can get into and say this is you know I'm going to really be the one that knows this thing. And the folks who are learning to do that are doing a great job.

**00:58:15**

**KM:** What have I not asked you guys that is important to both the story of your farm and its presence at the Market?

**00:58:37**

**AH:** You know the Market has allowed us to find our niche and our footing in the agricultural world. Not that we didn't have ideas of what to do or where to go but the Market really allowed us to try a lot of different things. And there's a lot of crops that we don't grow anymore because it just wasn't suited to us or the people at Market didn't like it. And so the Market has been really instrumental in sort of nurturing us and I know other farmers, too in that sort of less-brutal retail world than if we were opening our own store, our own restaurant or trying to sell into wholesale

or do something that has much stricter demands on what it does. And it has given us good pats on the back. The Market provides—not only does it provide money but it provides a reassurance that we're not crazy or that farming is a worthwhile thing to do and that the customers really do appreciate what we're there for and you know you're out here all week sweating and getting bugged at and carrying on doing one thing or another. And you go to Market on Saturday and the customers are just so happy to see you and—. And yeah; you have some grumpy customers that don't like something but generally they're really happy to see you and really proud of what you do and it makes you proud of what you do and so we—and we take our staff down there. It's important for us that our staff goes down and works at Market too because they need that same sort of reassurance that they're not crazy and that maybe when one of us says no, you've got to pick it just this size or it has to be just this quality big—well who cares, you know well then they see who cares.

**01:00:45**

And so that's important that they are exposed to that too. So the Market gives us all those sort of feedback loops—good and bad, business-oriented, relationship-oriented, and in many ways it's the only time we ever see our fellow farmers. We almost never see them other than at Market. Every once in a while you know you'll go by someone's farm to pick up something or see something but usually it's well as Betsy says, we're agricultural shut-ins and so the only time we actually see our fellow laborers of the field is standing side-by-side at Farmers Market selling something.

**01:01:25**

**KM:** Do you have anything to add?

**01:01:28**

**BH:** I don't think so. I think he got it. [*Laughs*]

**01:01:31**

**KM:** Well thanks for sharing your stories with us.

**01:01:35**

**[End Alex & Betsy Hitt Interview]**