APRIL McGREGER

Owner, Farmer's Daughter – Hillsborough, NC

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Date: May 15, 2011
Location: April McGreger's home – Hillsborough. NC
Interviewer: Kate Medley
Length: 1 hour, 22 minutes
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

[Begin April McGreger Interview]

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Kate Medley: So I'll start out by saying this is Kate Medley interviewing April McGreger as part of the SFA Carrboro Farmers' Market Oral History Project. It's May 15, 2011, and we are in April's living room outside of Carrboro, near Hillsborough?

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April McGreger: It's in Hillsborough, but it's closer to Carrboro.

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KM: I'll get you to start out by introducing yourself, telling us what you do and telling us your birth date.

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AM: My name is April McGreger. I was born April 27, 1977, in Vardaman, Mississippi. I sell pickles and preserves and baked goods at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, and I've been selling there since May of 2007.

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KM: Give us an introduction to what is the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

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AM: Oh my. Well, the Carrboro Farmers' Market has been in operation for over thirty years now. It's really sad that I don't know exactly the date. We had our thirtieth year anniversary not too long ago.

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And it's a very well respected market in the state and in the country. It's one of the few grower or producer-only markets, meaning that in order to sell something at the Farmers' Market you actually have to be the person who grew or produced, as in the jams, the food that you're selling. It's one of the very—I think it's the only market in the State of North Carolina and one of the very few in the country where that's the case.

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I really don't know how many vendors we have or anything like that. It's grown hugely even since I've been part of the market. We probably have—well I would just be guessing. It would be embarrassing how far off I would probably be to guess **[*Laughs*]**, but when I first started at the Wednesday Market in 2007 we only had one of the pavilions that was full. Now both of the Wednesday Market pavilions are full, so that's only been since 2007. And now on Saturdays, you know, every spot that we have is totally full, almost every Saturday, and we're now a year-round market—so that was a really big, really big change I think. And part of the reason that we were able to go to a year-round market is because in the last five years or so we've really grown a lot in terms of meat producers and things like that.

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So having meat to sell in the wintertime has been a real big boost for farmers and for a producer like me, who does jams and things—the wintertime I could, you know—I should be able to sell and have product through the wintertime. I haven't got there in terms of production yet because—but it's my goal. And we've had a lot of farmers in recent years who have gotten

into the market and who are specializing in winter production, which is also really great, not just for farmers and those kind of economic opportunities available for young farmers entering—niches for young farmers entering the market, but it's also great for consumers and eaters in the Carrboro and Triangle area.

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KM: For someone who has never been to North Carolina and the Carrboro/Chapel Hill area, specifically, describe that town, that area, and how the Farmers' Market fits into that.

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AM: I think of the Triangle as being this perfect storm of educated folks. We have three universities at least in the Triangle and then numerous other community colleges and smaller, you know, private colleges and things in the surrounding area.

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We have, you know, these prestigious academics and really amazing hospitals and healthcare—Research Triangle Park, you know, cutting-edge research, very educated and mostly affluent folks, so there's money available to support this idealist food system. And part of that has been very much—so we have all this—we have this metropolitan area, but immediately surrounding it and even in between the different cities you very quickly fall into rural places and farm—old farmland and populations, which is essentially where we are right now if you look out the window.

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And so part of this food movement I think has been to preserve that—the rural space, to preserve what's remaining of the farmland, and that's been very much what drives me I think at

least. And I think it drives a lot of consumers, eaters, and shoppers at the Farmers' Market as well; this idea that not just lowering our food miles, but that we don't want the whole Triangle to become, you know, Cary or even Raleigh where we just have endless amounts of this urban sprawl. And so part of what it means to prevent that—it means to buy retail from farmers and from small producers like myself because that means the greater percentage of that dollar goes into the pockets of the farmers and the producers. And that provides more money to be a steward of the land and to, you know, prevent those farmers or producers from selling that land to developers. Farmers have to be able to compete with the value of the land, if that makes sense. It makes their prices go up, so in order for them to have a feasible business they need to have more money. It costs more money essentially to farm in places that are close to urban areas and not just in the center of the country where there's, you know, relatively little competition for for the land.

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KM: Uh-hm.

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AM: Did I answer that question?

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KM: You did. How did you land here?

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AM: I came here in 2000, I believe, for Graduate School in Geology—at UNC. I came from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. I came to get a Masters Degree in Geology. And that's a really long story. I guess we could go into that, but then I ended up—.

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KM: I want to hear some of that story.

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AM: Okay. So I do have a Masters Degree in Geology. I managed to finish that. But I met my husband here, and I met a lot of really great friends here, and a lot of the friends that I met from the. Well the first—the day that kind of changed everything for me in Carrboro—or Chapel Hill, whatever, was the day that I went to a *Food Not Bombs*, which is essentially a radical free food picnic on the street that is part of an anti-war movement and everything. It's like a community-building exercise.

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I went to a *Food Not Bombs* meeting at Internationalists Books in January of 2001, I suppose, with a friend of mine, who was a fellow Geology major and also a Mississippi native, and that day Phil, my husband, was playing old-time music. He was playing the banjo on the street at the *Food Not Bombs* meeting. So that day I met Phil. We were just friends and played music together and were part of—he was singing a song and eventually I sang a verse of the song; that was how we met. And anyway so after that – I had talked to that group of people who were into old-time music and began playing a little bit of music with those people regularly. And through this—through Internationalists Books, which is sort of a radical bookstore, pretty political, politically engaged—there were a lot of young people. One of the people that I met on

that same day was Jay Hamm who was a mentor for me in terms of politicizing my food awareness and food choices and those sorts of things.

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He, at that time I believe, had just moved—I can't remember if he was still living there or he had just moved—from a permaculture farm called Sustenance Farm in Bear Creek, North Carolina which is in Chatham County, which is a permaculture farm. At one point they were completely, like—grew all the food that they consumed themselves. And Jay was from Atlanta, so he was totally a Southern boy and had been in Atlanta in the—for the Olympics like—and had seen all the craziness and—. Anyway part of his politicizing had come out of that Atlanta experience and—.

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Anyway he was talking, you know, back then in like 2001 about eating seasonally and, you know, people were very interested in the—it was the DIY Movement was really strong in that community. Like what are you, you know **[*Laughs*]**—we said it all as a joke you know, but the whole idea of after the Revolution comes, you know, are you going to be able to grow your own—. **[*Laughs*]** All the things you need to know how to do yourself. You need to know how to grow your own food. And that idea of people who could do that was a really—and people who could do things was highly valued and respected within that community.

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Because of that, because I had actually—you know the whole nature of all these politics were a little bit new to me and I was always a little bit of an outsider—I was valued but I always kind of hung out on the perimeter of those kinds of things. I never—I don't know. I never felt particularly at home in that community but I did value a lot of those ideas. And I definitely felt at home and had a close connection with a couple of the people in that community, and I had

mentioned, like, George O'Neill was another person that I had met who is also a young farmer who has a little farm that sells at the Durham Farmers' Market on Saturdays. And he was part of that community too. But what I was trying to say was that I think because I had come from this agricultural background and I already knew how to do a lot of these things, so I think I was valued in that community because I knew a good deal about—.

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KM: You had street-cred.

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AM: Yeah. I had some sort of street-cred, exactly. I already knew a little bit about farming. Actually I already knew enough about farming to be a little less romantic than the suburban kids were about it, and which, you know, probably if I had been a little bit more suburban, I would have ended up being a farmer and not a restaurant person or not a cook because I felt like I had already done that. I started working in sweet potato fields in the summertime when I was 12, I think **[*Laughs*]**—and before that I had plenty of home chores like picking peas and all those kinds of things, so you know, I felt like I had kind of done my time.

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But I did take a lot of classes in Sustainable Agriculture at Central Carolina Community College and I think that program was really huge in terms of what Carrboro and the Triangle have really become in terms of this center for sustainable agriculture and, you know, small-scale farmers' markets and artisan food movement—all of those types of things I think are all—I think Central Carolina Community College doesn't get enough credit for its responsibility—its part in

the development of this culture and neither does I think the young punk radical movement that you know many of us—.

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And like I said, I don't consider myself as coming out of that scene but it was still very influential for me and I definitely met a lot of people through that scene. It was very much so a source of connection for me when I first moved here. And at that time I was really—**[*Sighs*]**. Let's see, Jay Hamm was also talking about like fermentation and making miso and making sauerkraut and kimchi, and it was through that group of folks that I met Sandor Katz who wrote the book *Wild Fermentation*. And I took a class from him through the Punk Co-Op House in Carrboro when when *Wild Fermentation* was just a little 'zine and he was like traveling around the country and teaching these little classes.

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It was a skill-share actually, where I took that class from him and at that same skill-share I taught a class on soap-making and Phil taught a class on like stenciling or something, you know, so it was very much like a little scene I think in those days.

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Yeah. Did I answer that question? How do I get here and why did I stay? Let's see, so that was kind of how I got to Carrboro, and during those years that I'm talking about—I was still in Graduate School, but my roommate or my housemate at the time, Rachel, I think had already dropped out of Graduate School and she had moved. See at one point she decided to move out to Western North Carolina and was living on Joe Hollis' farm or—he has a farm called Mountain Gardens out around Celo, North Carolina, where he grows all different kinds of—it's a permaculture garden center but he focuses on I think Chinese medicinal and lots and lots of other stuff. But he's a very well respected guy in the whole permaculture sustainable farming crowd.

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So all this was going on and I wasn't necessarily participating in this kind of farming thing, but it was going on all around me, and this time I had gotten really interested in food and had become an avid shopper at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, and Jay Hamm was a seller at the Carrboro Farmers' Market. And one of the things that I was critiquing the market for and had noticed about the market and just about the Triangle culture in general, was, you know, I had come from Mississippi and taking I guess a lot of the cultural food stuff for granted and had moved here and like I said, a lot of these people were from cities or suburban, like the people my age and the people that I was hanging with. And I was like, "How come there are no peas at the market?" You know, "Where do you get peas from?" And people didn't know what I was talking about when I said peas, by which I mean, you know, field peas—like in the black-eyed pea family, but I don't mean black-eyed peas. I mean fresh or green peas, like purple hull peas, or Crowder peas, or Speckled Crowder(s), blah, blah, blah—whatever. There's a million different varieties.

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So I saw that there were all these choices—all these foods that I had never really seen, you know, locally grown and fresh before, like carrots and let's see, you know, escarole and radicchio and all these, you know, European vegetables and stuff that were very exotic and high end or whatever, but there was this lack of southernness, and, you know, part of that is because as a population there was a lot of turnover, and most people who live here aren't from here. It is a place that's pretty disconnected to its southernness, lots of transient folks here. And so I kind of saw that a little—I don't even know that I thought that it was needed or that people, the population or whatever, was missing out on its southernness, but I didn't want to lose those things. I wanted people who enjoyed or, you know, like iced tea and shelling peas and who knew what, like, fried corn was and, you know, that ate like cabbage and cornbread and all those

things. You know, I wanted that to remain part of my life and I think I was really homesick for my grandparents cooking and even my parents cooking and things like that.

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So I had started getting more and more interested in food. And part of it was making all these different kinds of Southern foods and things for people, and in the meantime I was still in Graduate School. I was traveling around the world. I did my Graduate Research in Stromboli, Italy, and, you know, when I came back from Italy all I was talking about was the food and not the geology. And Phil and I were dating by this point, and he was the person who had encouraged me to give food as a profession I guess a chance.

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And so you know, I kind of laughed him off at some point and my original response was, like, oh no, but you know food is my passion and I don't want to ruin it. I don't want to taint it—that kind of idea. But he kept pushing me in that direction, and, you know, he very much thought that whatever piece people were passionate about should be what they should put their life's work into that passion.

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Under his encouragement I actually did a little bit of reading like oh, what does it mean? I was so naïve to have a career in food or whatever. And somewhere I had read something that said, you know, if you were interested in getting in food, you know, your first job or whatever should be as high up as you could possibly get, and then you should start at the bottom of a really amazing restaurant and not at the top of a crappy restaurant, if that makes any sense.

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So I took that advice and I wrote a resume, and I wrote kind of like—something about selling myself on my food passions or something and just went to Lantern Restaurant, which had just recently opened, and I really liked it. And—

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KM: What was The Lantern?

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AM: Oh, okay. So Lantern Restaurant had just opened in—I think it opened in 2001, maybe 2002. And it was a restaurant that actually has an Asian focus but with this idea of using locally grown ingredients and seasonal food, and it was also a kitchen that was almost at that point almost exclusively run by women, which I was also really impressed with and really liked that idea. And I had supported myself through college and working in restaurants but it was mostly in front of the house, and even when I had shown interest in working in the back of the house at Hal & Mal's, they had said you don't want to do that, like it was very much so, and that's Hal & Mal's in Jackson, Mississippi.

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You know, there was this idea that women, and particularly young and/or attractive women, like, don't work in the back of the house. You know, that's for old dudes and **[*Laughs*],** I don't know, people who are a lot more rough around the edges than, like, a 20 year-old female.

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So I decided that I wanted to work in the kitchen and had taken my resume to Sylvia Pahola who was the Kitchen Manager at the time. And she interviewed me and then she was like, well what are you doing tonight? So that night I came in and worked and she was like just come

in and, you know, just see what you think. And the first night that I ever went there she sent the person who I was kind of trailing home and I just worked the salad station that first night that I ever went there. And then I worked there for, like, six and a half years after that and kind of worked my way up from salad station to—at the end I was the Pastry Chef there for about three and a half years.

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And anyway, so then I graduated. I did complete my Masters Thesis, but when I started at Lantern was through with classes and was just writing my thesis. And anyway I liked it. I liked food. It was the first time of my life where, you know—in geology it was always very interesting to me but I never felt like I was the best. It never came naturally to me—and what I mean by that is a lot of geology is math **[*Laughs*]** and a lot of that is like a recording. I was really good at fieldwork, but when it came to, like, doing statistics and filters and coming up with equations that solved **[*Laughs*]** what was going on inside of a volcano, I always felt like a poser because I really did not know exactly what I was doing. I was always just taking what someone had done before me and just trying to make sense of it.

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Anyway, so I never felt like I was really a star in Geology, but the minute that I got into the restaurant business, I really felt like that I had found my calling or what I was meant to do. I was to the point of, like, an obsession probably—food had been, like, such a huge part of my life and now it was like my professional life. But I spent a lot of time thinking about food and not just about what to eat but, you know, what different foods mean, and foods and identity, and food and culture, and all those things that just always has been something that I had taken for granted. But being in this new place, I think it all became very much so alive for me.

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And part of my job as a Pastry Chef at Lantern was sourcing all these local foods and really being in-tune with the seasons. So and this idea of—or the process of really, like, looking for the best fruits that were available in the area and then working with those fruits and developing different recipes for those fruits, and that became my passion as a Pastry Chef—was the local fruits and things and particularly those that were kind of associated with Southern identity—like I loved to do stuff with muscadines and scuppernongs and one of the things that I realized was that I was really good at doing that because a lot of people—not everyone who owns restaurants in the South actually grew up eating, you know—they didn't actually grow up in the South. And because I was this wild child from the country, you know, I had grown up eating muscadines and scuppernongs as a kid in the woods, and I had a certain kind of relationships to these foods, so it became my goal to put muscadines, scuppernongs, sorghum, all these Southern foods on the menu of an Asian restaurant owned by a New Jersey-ite, you know, like that kind of—the making—putting a Southern—just an appreciation that these ingredients, even though they're iconic Southern ingredients, still can compete with what was much more, at the time, revered, which were European or California kind of ingredients of—.

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My thinking was that, you know, a lot of people were really inspired by California cuisine in the restaurant world at that time and it's not like I was the first person doing this. I mean definitely Bill Neal had been a major—I had discovered his cookbooks and had been very inspired by them.

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Anyway my idea was even though maybe like Chez Panisse or whatever, has like a hazelnut whatever ice-cream, we shouldn't be doing hazelnut even if we are, you know, a fine-dining Asian restaurant. We should still be using pecan because they're just as good as any

hazelnut—or better in my opinion and, you know, we can get fresher, better ones. And so I was trying to use Southern ingredients in non-Southern ways, like making Southern ingredients fit into an Asian menu. So we had like a fig and scuppernong like mochi cake, which is the Japanese glutinous rice flour cake, you know, things like that—that were just kind of off the wall where instead of using a red bean paste with green tea ice cream, I did a boiled peanut-like paste with green tea ice cream so—using these iconic Southern ingredients, which actually boiled peanuts are also very traditional and important to Asian cooking in general.

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So it was also about finding these things that were very Southern that actually were common threads between the cultures of different Asian cultures as well and highlighting those things. But at some point, I began to tire a little bit of both of working nights and had become, you know, still very much of an avid shopper at the Carrboro Farmers' Market and part of that as a shopper, I would critique, you know, we have all this amazing produce but we still are lacking in terms of prepared food vendors, like a lot of—we need more people who are using local produce and making higher quality prepared foods, you know. And no one was doing fermented foods, which I had gotten into and was interested in those types of things, and so when it came time for me to—I really wanted to leave the restaurant world. I was trying to figure out what I would do and I just thought oh, well I'll sell fermented foods at the Farmer's Market and baked goods because I already had a reputation as a Pastry Chef.

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But then it became a really long road of trying to figure out how to do that because no one was doing, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture didn't really want to—know how to regulate that. And anyway so that was part of which began the process of trying to figure this out and figure out what would it take to bring these types of food to market. And that's how

Farmer's Daughter was born I guess. I saw a need in the community for this type of business. Just as a shopper I would have bought those types of products or would have been happy to see those types of products—both fermented foods and, also like I had said, working with these fruits in season brought back a lot of memories of my mother and my grandmother both making lots of Southern style preserves too. And my mother's and my grandmother's preserves always tasted better than any that I had bought at the Farmers' Market. And I thought I could make those too.

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So I started playing around with those kinds of recipes. And I had seen my mother do it a million times, making pear preserves and fig preserves. And I had helped but always she had been the one who was doing it. And I had made a lot of pickles and relishes and things myself as a kid, but, you know, my mom had always told me that making preserves or whatever was too hard and as a kid she never really allowed me to do that because she was afraid that I would mess it up.

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So now on my own I had a chance to, you know, mess it up myself or do it myself and obviously working as a Pastry Chef and making lots of different fresh fruit desserts over a number of year, it's a good preparation for doing that type of thing.

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So I started in the Farmers' Market in the spring and my first thing was, you know, I brought a lot of different strawberry preserves and things like that to market, which, you know, strawberries are the trickiest and the hardest. And I figured that out, like, how to do those, and my mom doesn't even really know how to make great strawberry preserves, so I got to recently—in recent years, like, I showed my mom how to make really good strawberry

preserves. So that was kind of fun—to bring something back to her or whatever. Yeah. I think that's it. I can't think of anything else—any holes.

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KM: Bring us up to date on Farmer's Daughter.

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AM: When I started my business in 2007, I was working out of my home kitchen in downtown Carrboro in a house that was 750 square-feet, so my kitchen was like 10-by-10, really small. And my business had taken over our—it was a two-bedroom house and Farmer's Daughter had taken over the spare bedroom and half of the living room and the dining room **[*Laughs*]**, which the dining room was so tiny—I mean it wasn't even a dining room. It was just the eat-in kitchen. We took the table out of the kitchen and put, you know, metro-shelving, baker's racks and things in there that I needed for the business. So Farmer's Daughter had almost taken over our entire house except for the bedroom and the bathroom.

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So I knew that I had wanted for years to get the business out of my house because it was, you know, really hard. It was both hard to ever be finished with work or, you know, I had a passion for having dinner parties and things like that before, but once Farmer's Daughter had completely taken over my house it became more and more difficult to do that.

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So at some point Phil and I—well I started looking around to try to find a commercial kitchen space that I could perhaps rent or something and I couldn't find anything. I mean I didn't

just need a few hours here and there, like I really needed, you know, 40 hours and there wasn't anything local that I could find that fit my needs.

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So Phil and I started looking for a new property to buy and I really wanted a space that I could build a facility that was solely for Farmer's Daughter so that I could up my production and stuff for, you know—. From 2007 until now, like 2011, I've really struggled to just stay on top of the demand that I have solely at the Farmers' Market for my products. And I've had an interest in developing some either online sales or wholesale sales and things like that, and I've never been able to have enough production to be able to fill that niche and meet those demands.

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So when we finally bought the property where we are now just outside of Carrboro, it had a detached building that was a garage that had been converted into like a studio apartment that I saw as a potential to be able to put in a commercial kitchen facility for Farmer's Daughter. And that's where we are now. I'm still in the home kitchen of our new house but we've developed the plans and are going through the permitting process and getting our funds in order to build this facility that we hope for in the next year—will be able to triple production because we're getting so late started this year, just like double the production of pickles and preserves for this year and, you know, the goal that we would triple or quadruple our production ultimately with this new facility, which will hopefully be done by the end of the year.

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And when that happens, the goal is also to stay at the Carrboro Market but also to have like an e-commerce website, and online sales, and to become a—well with Farmer's Daughter even though we've had extremely small production, in the past couple of years we've won three national awards, blind taste-testing awards for our products, and have developed a good

reputation, and have gotten some national press, and we've been timid about national press for the very reason that, even though we know that we have a really great product, we just didn't want to create a demand for the product that we couldn't match.

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So the goal is to be able to pursue that and be able to back it up with production, so those are our goals—and to be a regional supplier and a national supplier through online sales of products, particularly those preserves and pickles and relishes with, like, a modern Southern kitchen kind of bit to them.

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KM: What's the role that the Carrboro Farmers' Market has played in your business?

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AM: It's played a huge role. First of all, the name Farmer's Daughter came about initially because, I mean, I am a farmer's daughter but my father, my parents, my family are all in Mississippi. And so the Farmer's Daughter is meant to be literal as well as sort of proverbial in that I'm now in this area, the Triangle part of North Carolina. And many of the farmers that I've developed relationships with at the Farmers' Market before I was ever a vendor there myself were non-traditional farming families. They may be two women who own a farm. They may be a single woman who owns a farm. Maybe just people who have never had children, you know, like Bill Dow who is like a retired doctor, you know just a lot of farmers who had been my suppliers through Lantern were just not what I had grown up with as a traditional kind of farming family.

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And so for that reason, without this extended family, this idea of the farm being this unit of, you know, someone grows the produce, someone preserves the produce—we had a lot of farmers who maybe had excess produce different parts of the year, but they neither had the extended family, or the labor for people, or the skill of how to preserve and put up those products, and, you know, the buzzword, to do value-added products. So I thought of myself as the person who had those skills and now here I am, like the Farmer's Daughter, like 800 miles from the family farm—this whole idea that I would be these farmers' daughter, like I would take the product that they grow and then as a small-scale manufacturer or whatever, I would make these products and that would be the basis of my business.

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So the farmers at the Carrboro Farmers' Market started off primarily as my suppliers. They were my father farmer, you know. They grew the produce and really amazing produce and that being what's the most important I think in terms of making the best products is you can't take a supermarket strawberry and turn it into really amazing strawberry preserves. So if I'm going to make award-winning products I have to have award-winning produce to begin with. And the Carrboro Farmers' Market is a source for, like, the finest like produce in the world—it's amazing the stuff that you can get there, the freshness of it.

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You know my strawberries that we had on biscuit before we did this interview—on John Soehner's farm, Eco Farm, those strawberries were picked on Tuesday morning and by Tuesday night they were in the jars, so you know you can't get that freshness of flavor with strawberries that were picked like 2,000 miles away. So they're key and then beyond that, I mean you know. So yes, perfect produce, amazing—the basis for our products that being a major thing, but then also, they were an inspiration for me—they were the community I think that I had really—part of

moving to North Carolina, one of the things that I—it took me a really long to find North Carolina, to feel like North Carolina was my home.

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I didn't have a connection to the land here—which meant I didn't have a connection to place. My family has lived in Mississippi for six generations on both sides. And I really missed that. I missed the multi-generational aspect of my community in Mississippi, and I really felt the sense of loss when I had moved to North Carolina. And so the Farmers' Market became my source for a multi-generational community. I mean that's one of the most valuable things about the market for me and why I wanted to be a vendor there—is that it really is this family, huge family, dysfunction and all. It really is this big family.

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And then there's the customers at the market which—the Farmers' Market I think is a great place to experiment with different products. So through my stand at the Carrboro Farmers' Market—it's been a great place to experiment with what products people react to: what are the most popular products, what is there the most demand for, what products even are the most profitable. So in terms of growing my business beyond the Farmers' Market, the market has just been a really great place for kind of like market research or that type of thing. And you know we have **[*Sighs*]** a very, I guess, educated clientele at the market—it's just a great place both because you're the person who made the product, you know, and you're the person who sells the product.

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There aren't a lot of opportunities for that in the current market. Most products that we buy are totally anonymous and even in restaurants, the people who cook the food are not the people who sell the food, are not the people who hear the criticisms or the praises of the food. So this idea of, like, selling directly to your customers—it's extremely educational and the

opportunity I think, which is one of the main reasons that I really wanted to be at the Farmers' Market and one of the reasons that I have—even though it's really hard **[*Laughs*]**, one of the reasons that I have stayed and what has been my passion has been this access to people—this idea of changing food culture. I'm not just selling chocolate chip cookies—I think I'm very different from mass market stuff for the reason that I'm selling products that I have a lot of expectation for the consumer as far as them understanding my products, wanting them. You know, I'm not selling fig preserves; I'm selling the story of fig preserves. I'm telling the history of fig preserves, of why these whole fig preserves are important to us as Southerners and our identity, and how my mother made them this way, and how you know they're made from a very particular variety of figs that grow in the South that are extremely perishable, that if you don't live in the South you don't get these kinds of figs.

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Anyway so that—and because I'm having direct relationships with all of my customers, you know, these stories, this history behind the food—is as much a part of my product line or my mission as a business as is, you know, just selling the product.

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KM: Give us a sense of to be a vendor at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, what does that entail? What is that schedule like?

00:48:06

AM: **[*Laughs*]** Okay. So it really depends on what you're making and what your standards are I guess. **[*Sighs*]** One of the reasons—as I said when I started the market I was doing a lot of baking, and I still am a baker even though I keep trying to retire from baking just because of the

grueling schedule. And since I have had my son who is now six and a half months old, it's been even harder to maintain that schedule.

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The market begins on Saturday mornings at 7:00 a.m., but there is no official start time to the market. That means that the customers who insist on getting the very precious first asparagus, or the wild plums, or the, you know, whatever is kind of new and different and extremely limited quantities, or maybe there's people who want to avoid the crowds. There are customers you know who show up to market at 6 o'clock when I get there to set up. It's already kind of humming with customers. I'm always amazed at that.

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And that means as a baker—I won't sell product that has been baked and frozen. That's something that you could do as a market vendor and definitely some vendors do that. But I, particularly things like biscuits and scones, I really would only like to sell them hot, so **[*Laughs*],** you know, I wish I had ovens that I could take to the market and be selling hot biscuits. And actually even though my specialty and—one of the things that I love the most and I would love to be able to sell at market is, you know, just a traditional Southern style biscuit, but I won't do that because they're just not that great when they're not hot. To me, they don't meet my standards.

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So as a baker I used to get up at midnight to start baking for the 6:00 a.m. market to get to market at 6:00 a.m. Since my son was born I cut back on the baking that I'm doing for market, so now I get up at 3:30 to bake for market. I'm only—and and make a couple of breads and things like that, that I bake before I go to sleep because they need to be completely cooled before you can slice them and sell them and stuff. So I bake those at about 8:00 or 9 o'clock at night and

then around 10:00 I go to bed and I wake up at 3:30 for market. And right now my son still wakes up in the middle of the night to eat, and he knows that something is going on when I'm getting ready to market and he's not been that happy. So he's been between like 10:00 and 3:30, he's been eating twice. **[*Laughs*]** So it's been really hard since I came back and it's been—I mean I'm not—. And my husband works—he works three or four weekday nights a week where he works until 8 o'clock and then Friday and Saturday are the two nights of the week that he doesn't work. And on Friday night I'm working, and on Saturday night I'm so exhausted my body hurts, you know, from the long shift that I've pulled, and also I'm anti-social because I've talked my head off all day long at market that, you know, I feel like I just need to crawl in a hole and not socialize again for about another week.

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And so you know Betsy Hitt calls it a mixed marriage, you know, one person who is part of the market lifestyle and one person who isn't. It's a constant struggle. And anyway so—getting up anywhere from midnight to 3:00 or 3:30 in the morning and, you know, granted it's not like I went to bed early and like on Fridays, you know, I'll work 12 to 16 hour shifts and then on Saturdays get up at—. But my goal is somehow I'm going to have to figure out how to wean my customers off of my chocolate babka, and scones, and sunshine buns, and just go to making pickles and preserves—because at some point I'm going to get old prematurely from this schedule, and so either that or I'm going to have to figure out if I can hire someone. But no one wants a job where you have to get up a midnight to start working. **[*Laughs*]**.

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KM: So get it while you can.

00:53:42

AM: So yeah. Get it while you can. Their life is limited.

00:53:52

KM: Who are your customers? Who are the market customers?

00:53:59

AM: It's always changing actually. I have customers who have been my customers since the very first market that I went to. And the really weird thing about the market customers are, you know, because we deal in cash sales, it kind of is difficult to figure out who your customers are, because it's not like it's a credit card and it's not like a reservation at a restaurant where you're taking down their name and you find out more about them. It's not like that.

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Like a lot of customers I know a lot of information about them. I know how they like their coffee. I know what their favorite preserves are. I know what their consumption of sauerkraut is but a lot of them I don't really know what their, you know, professional life or their personal life—I don't know that much about it. I do know a number of my customers are employed through the University either as—I have a couple of professors, you know. I have historians, actually, my clientele if I would probably be a lot more intimidated by them if I really knew all their stories. **[*Laughs*]** A lot of them are very educated, or have an interest in history, or public health. I have a lot of customers who have those types of backgrounds. Yeah. I wish I had more time to find out more about my customers—but a lot of times the market, because we're only open for a few hours, the pace at the stand is really fast and they have a million questions for me. So I end up doing more talking than I do listening unfortunately.

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KM: Young, old?

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AM: Retirees, you know, I mean honestly, most of my customers tend to be middle-age and I think that's just because that's—and a lot of—more women than men. And I feel like that's just because that's what most of the Carrboro Farmers' Market customers are you know—there definitely are a lot of, like, young families but there are—I probably am not the popular vendor for people buying treats for their kids because that's really just not my target.

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I mean definitely my pickles and, like, sunshine buns and things like that are popular with children but it's really not what I'm targeting. My product is a little bit more—without being insulting to those products. It's just, you know, I'm trying to tell a story with a lot of different products and it's not just like the sweetest gooiest thing. I want my products to be—I don't mean that others are more yummy, but I want them to be really delicious. But I want it to be something that's not just about instant gratification, but as something that is going to, I don't know, feed your soul or feed your mind and not just be this gooey sweet thing that you eat while you're shopping and then you're done thinking about it until the next week.

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I guess I demand a little bit more from my customers. I probably have more women between the ages of about 40 to 60 than I have any other customers. And I have customers whose children have autism, who are interested in fermented foods because there's been a little bit of research that has supported that. I have cancer survivors who are interested in fermented foods

and things like that. You know, I have people whose mothers and grandmothers made preserves but they don't make them who are interested in, you know, more of my Southern style products. And then I have lots of little old ladies who really love scones so **[*Laughs*]**, you know, so I have lots of that. I mean my mother loves scones, so I guess I have a lot of my mother shopping at my stand. It seems like a lot of those types of customers.

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But there are definitely some young folks. And, I have different products who have—every one of my products I feel like has a different, whatever, target customer. And like, I do these syrups and I give out recipes for, like, making cocktails and making, like—I had strawberry—this past week, I had strawberry hibiscus syrup and strawberry honeysuckle syrup, and I had recipes for making different cocktails or whatever. And so I have like a younger clientele that buys those products. And also I sell these sunshine buns which are like sticky buns, and I sell New Orleans style iced-coffee and all of those things draw I think a younger clientele.

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And then the preserves and things like that are kind of all over the map. They can be anyone, but you know more women than men in general.

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KM: Do you have a sense of—to bring the farmer into the picture, to bring your parents into the picture, what's their perspective on either your product or your outlet? The Carrboro Farmers' Market is a far cry from how they deal in goods.

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AM: Yeah, my parents are—I mean I've been giving them small doses of this sort of farmers' market approach to agriculture since I moved here, and they've been interested but, you know, it was a slow process. Recently my dad has mostly retired. He now helps my brother with farming sweet potatoes on the scale of hundreds of acres. But he himself doesn't have his own planting anymore. And in this, like, semi-retirement, what he's done is he now grows a huge garden just for their personal consumption and because he loves to just give food away. And with that he—like I got them some Cherokee purples and some Sun Gold tomatoes and, so I got them growing different heirloom tomatoes, and now every year they plant Cherokee purples and, you know—. So in a lot of ways they've come a long way and, you know—they keep struggling with trying to plant an organic garden and learning all that stuff. So usually my dad breaks down and puts, like, Seven Dust on his Cherokee purples or something, which I'm always like, no.

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And my dad also got chickens, like, a couple years ago for the first time. And, you know, every time I come down—oh he planted an orchard. And this is all like since I've moved to North Carolina and started telling him about all these things, so—and he always had this interest, but he had a full-time, more than full-time job so he didn't have the time really to do this kind of stuff. So he now has lots of different—like he probably has 15 or 20 different fruit trees that he's planted in the last five years, and his garden gets bigger and bigger every year, and we had a big garden, access to a big garden when I was a kid, but it was my mother's father who mostly grew the traditional Southern crops and stuff. And my dad always grew squash, and cucumbers, and tomatoes but not as much, like, pole beans and corn and those kinds of field crops my grandfather always grew.

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But they are very interested in—every year they seem like they learn a little bit more and—and I've encouraged my brother to look into this idea of doing organic, or sustainable, or even it's not organic or sustainable, just growing and selling direct to the customer to do to retail agriculture, farmers' market based agriculture as a way to—what they get paid for their sweet potato crop, it's crazy. It's crazy. It's like $7 or something and that's for like 50-pounds of sweet potatoes. And that's probably a good price. It totally just depends on what the market says, and they never know every year, and they have no idea what they're going to make on their sweet potatoes until they make it. And a lot of that is true for farmers regardless. I mean there is just a certain amount of inherent risk involved in farming, and you have to be a little bit crazy to do it to begin with.

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But with middleman and being dependent on kind of the global price or whatever of your produce it is very unjust for farmers. So I've encouraged that and they're definitely interested in it, but they live in a really rural area and even, you know, my mother is interested in my preserves and stuff and—. My mother was a school teacher for 30 years and has retired and—I told her—she was wanting to know what she should do for a part-time job or something. And I was like you should sell your preserves at like Sweet Potato Sweets downtown, which is this little small bakery and that sells sweet potato based treats in downtown. And she's like no one is going to buy that. People can make their own preserves. So I think, you know, they're still very much part of the culture that devalues women's work and handmade or homemade, or, you know, they take it for granted. They value it but not in a monetary sense. It's not thought of as something that you can buy.

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And just in general, my parents were very disappointed when I started working in the food business. They really didn't understand. You know they thought that I essentially was wasting my education which they were not very supportive of my education to begin with. They never really understood what it was that I was doing and, you know, they made like—I was the butt of many jokes in my extended family—like that I was a professional student—and I didn't go to school that long. Like it's not like I have a PhD or anything. **[*Laughs*]** I had a double major as an Undergrad and everyone thought that was just the craziest thing ever. And education is just not the most highly valued thing in rural communities in general—and not in my family.

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And they thought that I had left them because I moved away, but when I did get the job at Lantern and was working in food and working in restaurants, you know, I was a cook. And my mother, I remember she said, "so and so is a cook and they don't even have a high school degree, you know, they didn't even graduate from high school." So it was very much so like why would you have all this education and do something that is a job that traditionally is reserved for people who have very little education at all?

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But since that they have visited, since then they have read things about my business and what I'm doing and a little bit more of my values and mission and stuff, you know—and that part of what—the mission of my business is to honor my heritage and culture and family and food, culture, food-based identity and all this sort of thing. You know, they're flattered I think. It's taken a long time to get there, but they're starting to value it. They still think that I work too much and why would I want to do that? But to some degree they're finally starting to be somewhat, like, proud of me for what I'm doing and they are starting to value their own food culture and these gifts that they've given me and stuff—they're starting to value that more. And

you know, it's hard to tell how much of it is coming from me and if I was doing it and it wasn't being reinforced by media in some way it's become—I think part of the media has been talking a little bit more about like traditional Southern and that kind of stuff. But because I'm doing it and they're hearing it a little bit, they're starting to value more things and starting to do more things. And you know my mom is—they just talk about things in a different way. They have more awareness I think of the value of their own culture. And that's a good thing, I think. I think that's a good thing. If we're not aware of its value, then it's much more easy to lose it.

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KM: Good, tell us a little bit about the challenges of having a place like a farmers' market, the Carrboro Market as a primary outlet for your goods.

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AM: Well as I've already told you, the hours of things are hard. The seasonality of it is hard. You know that—and I think a lot of the stresses of it would be the same, are just the stresses of a small business and the stresses of a down-trending economy and things like that, but for sure, the hours and the seasonal basis of it are really difficult.

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You know loading and unloading is one of the hardest things I think—that we don't have permanent stands or anything so it's just hard physically on your body and so much of your labor I think and so much of your time goes into loading up the truck and unloading the truck, and it's like at the end of market when you've been there for—where you've had very, very little sleep for two days, and you've been there standing for, you know, eight hours, and particularly in the summertime when it's like 100 degrees, and then you come home and you still have to unload

the truck. **[*Laughs*]** So that's one of the things I hate most about market—that and the lack of sleep.

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And probably the worst part of the market is—particularly as a young person going to market—is how it totally shuts down your social life because it's the weekend and I think it just makes it super-hard to lure young farmers into doing farmers' markets because it's like you really need to go to bed early on Friday night and then on Saturday night you're so exhausted that you need to go to bed early again. So I think it's difficult for that reason.

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I'm not the most social person. I mean I grew up in a really rural area so I guess for that reason—I'm not used to an excessive amount of partying on Friday and Saturday nights maybe **[*Laughs*]**, but I'm just also an introvert which I think part of farmers' markets and farming in general there's a good amount of isolation that occurs as part of the job. But then so you go from an extremely isolating experience to a need to be extremely extroverted and to talk nonstop for the entire time that you're working on Saturdays. So it kind of goes back and forth. And for someone who is introverted, like I said, that day of talking nonstop and socializing nonstop at market is kind of enough for most people so they can go back in their shell for the rest of the week. **[*Laughs*]**

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But in terms of a business, I'm trying to think if there's anything that I'm missing about why the farmers' market is a difficult place. It's difficult to gather information about your customers, which is very valuable information for businesses to have so that you can do marketing, so that you can do those types of things, because [the market is] cash-based. The cash-base nature of it makes it difficult for businesses. I mean we take checks but we haven't

been able to take credit cards. We now have a system that—called Truck Bucks, which people can bring their credit cards to market and get these wooden nickels or wooden $5 in order to pay for products and that's good for some, but in general if people are paying cash for products, they have much greater awareness for how many they're spending than if they were just giving us plastic. And we've been looking into the—you can now take credit cards on like an iPhone or Android phone or whatever and I was just about to start trying to do that, but the Farmers' Market now has begun the process of getting an ATM at market. I'm debating whether or not it makes sense because the thing about those credit card programs are that they do cost money and for a really small business, you know, it's a very narrow profit margin when the credit card companies are taking part of your profit, it's—I don't know. It's difficult to figure out how valuable they are, particularly when you're a small business owner and your time is your most precious resource, so adding just one other thing that you have to manage becomes—you just have to resist adding too many new things.

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KM: What do you love?

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AM: I mean I love first and foremost just this opportunity to kind of have my dream job, to have this business that is such a true expression of who I am as a person. I mean, like, a lot of times when people will talk about my—people will come up to my market stand and will say—sometimes it's not obvious at first glance like what it is that I'm doing or whatever you know **[*Laughs*].** It's just like you have so many cool products but, like, what's the connection between all these products?

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You know and I may have, you know, I have this very Northeastern Jewish chocolate babka which came out of the fact that it's my husband's favorite thing and then we have New York deli style pickles and that's also something that I picked up through Phil's Jewish heritage. And then there's the very obvious Southern stuff—like I said—fig preserves or pear preserves or bourbon figs or those kinds of things. But then there's the stuff that's very much influenced by kind of my fine-dining experience or restaurant experience where it's like, really some creative stuff whether it's like, I don't know, strawberry with rose geranium or lemon blueberry, lemon verbena preserves. So then there's that twist to things. And then there's kimchi or there's, like, curtido. There's things that are very much part of—or like Indian chutneys and those things are not just part of me being a young metropolitan whatever you want to call it—a cosmopolitan Southerner which, you know, my experiences have not been limited to Vardaman, Mississippi, but I have traveled a great deal. But they're actually part of—most of the products that I do are not just like something that I tasted at some relatively anonymous place. The reason that I do a lot of kimchi and kimchi is like one of my specialties is because my best friend is half Korean and that's been a huge part of—we've gone on many trips together and we've explored many Korea towns together. We've done a lot of eating at Korean restaurants together and a lot of talking about her childhood experience, like her visits with her grandparents in Korea and—.

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Anyway so those things aren't—it's not just I like kimchi. I have a personal relationship with those foods. The same thing for the Indian like chutneys and stuff that I do; I had two different Indian roommates in college and actually ate many meals at the tables of their families, and so Indian food is a thing that's pretty close to my heart and the flavors are just something that at a really pivotal point in my, I don't know, taste development. Those foods were

something that just blew me away. And so I have a couple of different Indian chutneys and stuff that I make.

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Anyway, so my product line is very much about my personal relationships with food and my personal explorations with those types of things and so for that reason that's my dream job. And then the second reason that the market is so important to me is like I said, it's been very much about that idea of community and it's been how I have been able to find my home in this place. I really feel more Mississippian than North Carolinian but probably if I was in Mississippi I might feel more North Carolinian than Mississippian. You know, it's like what you're longing for very much so is your power or whatever, you know. You always miss what you don't have.

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But I think in order to really feel at home in a place you have to have friends and connections with people who aren't just like you. And so the market is a great place for me. And as someone who grew up in a really rural area and had lots of, you know—like, country people are my people. And so the market is one of the few places that I'm able to encounter, you know, country folks and so there are vendors at the market that really remind me like of my grandfather and that those have been really important for filling a lot of voids that I had I think in my life when I moved here.

01:21:41

KM: Are there things that I haven't asked you about that you want to add?

01:21:46

AM: I can't think of anything. I mean I'm sure there must be something, right? Let's see, hmm, I can't think of anything.

01:22:09

KM: Okay, thanks.

01:22:11

AM: You're welcome.

[End April McGreger Interview]