CHRIS DUNKEL Stubby's BBQ – Hot Springs, AR

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Location: Stubby's BBQ – Hot Springs, AR Interviewer: Rachel R. Luster, SFA Intern Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs Length: 35 minutes

Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Arkansas

[Begin Chris Dunkel @ Stubby's Interview]

00:00:01

Chris Dunkel: We have some that are—you know are the startups but you have very few like McClard's and myself. For instance, they started in '28; I started in '52. But they—they have

their own style. We have our own style and neither of us have taken anything of the others, okay.

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Well then you have in Hot Springs alone there are four spin-offs of Stubby's, people who used to work for us and have opened up their own places. So they have all of their items of Stubby's in their restaurants now. Well then you have all the other people that have come in and taken all of McClard's ideas like the tamale spread, their—I'm trying to think of what other— French fries, home cut fries. You know we do potatoes; they do French fries. We don't take any

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Rachel Reynolds Luster: Your beans; and they do some too?

of either's—because we have our own—own style.

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CD: Yeah; our beans. But then you have the other people that come in and they don't—they they—and people say you know it's the most ultimate—it's an ultimate form of a compliment, flattery as far as with them taking your ideas. But you know it's like well let them come up with their own, you know. This is something we both have worked hard at and then everyone, you know they're like oh we'll do this; we'll do that. So they—they take the ideas and they run with it, but you know our thing is the bean pot. We do the potato supreme, you know and then

everybody—you know they have their tamale spread. We have our potato supreme. It—so you see the people that come in. And then they don't even make their own sauce. They'll buy a base like a KC Masterpiece or a bulk form sauce and they'll add a little bit to it and they'll call it their own. And that's what's funny is you have the people that come in that you know that—that use that. They don't start with the raw ingredients like they do or like we do and they just kind of they do—they call it their own where it's really not their own. You know it's—and then they you get even down to the—the purist you know regarding the—the type of pits they use. You have a lot of them are the up and comers now that they're gas, whereas that's—that's not—it's it's gas but they either have a wood hopper to where it shoots wood pellets in there or you throw a few sticks in there to give it a little smoke.

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And so the rules that I—I try to have people live by are you know there are three simple rules when it comes to a barbecue restaurant. Always be able to see the wood when you walk up to it. Never trust a place that owns a microwave and never trust a place that has matching chairs.

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RRL: Oh uh-huh.

00:02:35

CD: So everything, you know never have matching plates. Barbecue is simple; it's family and it's kind of mishmash. And you don't want to sit there and try to have a sterile pure, oh everything is matching environment because it—it—that's not barbecue. It—barbecue is simple. It's—it's there's a lot of time involved. There's a lot of care and preparation. You know a lot of the places now that are starting up, every—they just buy everything out of the can. They just

dump it and away they go. It's the preparation and that's what keeps the longevity there because

you know we—we still do our—our slaw from scratch. We hand-cut our cabbage; we chop it.

We—we smoke our red potatoes on the pit for our potato salad and then we hand-peel them and

then we mash them. And then we hand-cut the carrot, the—the celery, you know the onions.

Every—there's a lot of time and effort involved where I don't just pop a lid on something and

dump it out and say here you go. And McClard's is the same way. I mean everything is done

from scratch. We haven't deviated from that. Everything has remained the same since 1952 for

us. And you have the people now that start-up and they cut corners. And some of those products

from the big purveyors are—are decent, but when you really get down to it you can—the people

that really understand what it takes to put everything together, they can pick out the—the really

homemade scratch items versus the bulk, just throw it in a plate, throw it in a container and then

serve it

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RRL: Right—

00:04:12

CD: So it's—

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RRL: I'm one of those people. I can—I can taste and tell you what ingredient you know that

kind of thing. I for sure don't want to plastic tub or something from Sysco dumped on my plate.

The only other place in Hot Springs that was recommended to me was Purity.

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CD: He used to work for us.

00:04:34

RRL: Okay.

00:04:36

CD: You walk in there and it's—the line is set up the same. Purity, Mickey's, Chuck's and Midway; they're all set up the same because they all used to work for us at one time. So that's what's funny.

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RRL: Well then it sounds like a [inaudible]—.

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CD: Well I mean when—when you have you know from day one there were just a handful of restaurants in Hot Springs that were at that 50-year mark. And now it's really whittled down to just McClard's and I. You know we used to have Mrs. Miller's that started in '37; they were a catfish/chicken place. They were on Seven South. They closed down in I guess 2004 or 2005 maybe. There was Coy's—been around since 1945, famous steakhouse. They burned to the ground before the race meet last year or the year before. They've been gone either a year or two years. And—

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RRL: Are they planning on rebuilding?

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structure. I mean it just burned to the ground. On the eve of Oak One opening, what—I'm trying to think of—who else was in there? I mean there were very few restaurants that were in the 50-year club because they've all—it's—just restaurant business in general, you know you have such an influx of all the corporate chains that have come in town but it—it really—you've really got to be on your—your A-game especially in a town this size to keep producing a top-notch product. You have so many other barbecue places are here just in general and so people take it pretty seriously. So if you really—if you start to just kind of not care; you sit there and you kind

CD: I—you know it's been just sitting there. They just—there wasn't anything left of the

you, you know people—. I try to pass that onto the—the group that we have here and we only

of get lazy, you know people will see that. They'll notice that. But when you walk into Stubby's

and everything is in order, everything is wiped down, you've got a nice staff that's happy to see

have nine employees—but everyone works a fair amount but they have to understand that you

have—it's—it's all about what the client expects when they come in. You know you have to be

sure that there's a nice appealing picture when they open up the door and everything. You know

down at the floor is clean; the tables are clean; the chairs are always tucked in.

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RRL: And they don't match. [Laughs]

00:07:09

CD: And they don't match, but yeah. It's just—it's knowing that okay they can walk in and I'm—I'm guilty about this because I'm pretty anal about how—you know even when I go out to eat I just look at certain things, I mean down to your salt and pepper shakers that are wiped down to where when someone goes to grab it, it just doesn't go [Gestures]—doesn't slide out your fingers. It just—people just know that when they walk in they can kind of get that feel of this is an operation that they have their wits about them and they've got everything together to where you know they'll stand the test of time. You know they're always appreciative; you know thank you for dining. And it's nice seeing the generations that eat with us over the years.

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You know you have the grandparents that may have moved to the village and then they're having their kids eat with them. And then you have just the families that have been in Hot Springs for a number of years and you know their parents ate here and now their kids are having kids, so they're eating here. And you just have that—that generational impact.

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And you know I'm a dying breed. You know we don't see the type of restaurants of our caliber and McClard's caliber. They're coming fewer and farther between because it's so demanding and there's so much involved. But you—if it's family and—and it's your livelihood, you put forth the effort. You make sure your staff understands and you just keep putting out a wonderful product, and appreciating you know your customers coming in and making sure that you know they're—they enjoy themselves.

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RRL: So speaking of family, your parents bought this place in '77?

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CD: Uh-hm; '76. We—it's kind of funny. My parents moved from New York, not—not New

York directly to Hot Springs. There was a roundabout way but they ended up in—in Arkansas.

And at the time my father was involved with Coy's Steakhouse. And when he left Coy's they—

he—

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RRL: Did he cook there or—?

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CD: No; he was a—a Managing Partner with Coy's. And then when he left Coy's in '75 then

the opportunity came up to purchase Stubby's. He started talking to Mr. Stubblefield and they

came to terms and you know took over and bought it—well I guess they started the—the talks in

late '75 and they closed in '77, so in—between '75 and '77 is when everything kind of kicked in

gear.

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RRL: Was it that it looked like a great business opportunity or was there a specific interest in

barbecue or both or—?

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CD: Oh yeah; well it just—it was Mr. Stubblefield was looking to I guess retire and being that

you know my dad had—had already been in that type of environment for a number of years, he

realized that it wouldn't be an—an operation that would you know—he would sell it and it

would—it would just fall to the wayside because it was strong and it was continuing to be strong

and we grew after that.

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And it—when you—you know I've never thought about selling this but it's your baby

in—in a way because now that we've had it for 34 years, you know you think of if you were to

sell it to another family or another person you know it's—you're really—it's a part of you and

especially when you're at it seven days a week. And it—it would definitely be a piece of you that

would—would move on.

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RRL: It would have to be—

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CD: It would be tough.

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RRL: —at this point it's like an identity crisis.

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CD: Yeah; it—it would definitely—you know I've never thought about doing that but when that

day comes it—it won't be easy. It'll be tough.

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RRL: So did Mr. Stubblefield stay involved in any way afterwards or—?

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CD: He—yeah; he stayed on working out all the kinks, I think probably around a year. And then once everyone had their legs beneath them and the—the entire staff stayed. You know there wasn't a big shakeup; everything just remained as it was and it just went on from there. And then I—when they bought it I was three and from that point on really I was in and out of it, you know day-to-day. You know I'd ride up to work with my dad or my mom and then started working regular shifts during the race meet when I was in fourth grade. And so I've worked and thought it was the coolest thing to make like \$8 or \$10 in tips. I was like oh my God; this is awesome you know. I think everyone felt sorry for me because I was just this little kid you know.

[Interruption]

00:11:48

RRL: You didn't immediately run across the street and—.

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CD: No; my thing was I love to save my money to buy \$100 bills. So I would always save up my money and then a lot of times I'd have more money saved up in my room. And then my father would realize that he didn't have any money in his wallet and he knew exactly where to get it and then all of the sudden all my money was gone, but he would always pay me back with interest. But yeah; it—it was definitely—it was fun. I mean you just kind of grow up in it because I worked every facet of it you know. You know dishwashing, cleaning the pit, you know making all the salads, taking care of all the meats, so it's—it's just like in any family business. It doesn't matter if it's barbecue or if it's a hardware store or grocery. I mean you're—if —if

you're a family in a family operation you—you cover every corner of that business. You—when people don't show up you're covering all those shifts, so during high school when all my friends needed jobs yeah I would—we'd give them a job but then when spring break rolled around or any other—

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RRL: All you?

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CD: —I was always working because no one was showing up, so—. But yeah it—it's—it has its ups and downs that's for sure but we—.

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RRL: It did; it seems like the only people—the piece that I read online that your mom still works here with you?

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CD: Uh-hm; my mother, she's somewhat—she's kind of taken a step back. She's not fully retired but she—she's enjoying herself, which she should because she worked hard for many, many, many years. I'll bring her in to do a little paperwork here and there but I—I want her to enjoy herself and I can handle it, so—as long as she can file some invoices for me and keep everything straight on the paperwork side everything works pretty well. But yeah; it—mom is enjoying some time. That's for sure.

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RRL: Well tell me a little bit about your sauce. What kind of base is it?

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CD: It's—it's a ketchup, vinegar; it's a sweet mild sauce. You have—we're a sweet mild; McClard's is the hot spicy. So it depends on which—which you care for. I've never been fond of a spicy kick so we—you know luckily we're—we're on the sweet mild side. It—we start; when we—we make a batch up we'll start with about 40 gallons in our kettles and it'll cook down to around 15 gallons, so you—quite a bit of it burns off. And between the mixture of all the ingredients and when you're sitting there cooking it off it's in its own room. And when you bring people back there I'm—I'm accustomed to it, but when they open the door and they go to walk in they about fall over because it's—you have all that acidity from the vinegar burning off and it just—it about knocks them over. You get used to it after a few years and if ever you have a sinus infection I always tell people it's a good time to come because it'll clear your head right out.

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RRL: What kind of—what—what do you use to do the sweetness?

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CD: The sweetness, it's—it's a lot of sugar, so if you're a diabetic—

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RRL: Is it white sugar?

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CD: —white sugar, just regular sugar. It—and of course all the—the spices, the vinegar, the ketchup, so it's—it's got a fair amount of sugar in it. It—when people say they're—they're dieting or if they're diabetic I try to have them put it either on the side or just do away with it because it—it's definitely got—it's got some sugar in it. That's for sure.

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RRL: But you both, you and McClard's have your signature sauce and you just do the one sauce?

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CD: One sauce. We—we can do a hot sauce—well if—if people want me to kick it up a little bit I've got some items I can kick it up with but I really push our signature line. Well as far as the one sauce that we have and keep that as constant as—as possible.

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RRL: So how long would 15 gallons of sauce last?

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CD: Sometimes about a day. On—on a busy day we can go through a batch in a day between caterings and just day-to-day business.

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RRL: So you do caterings and you do here and do you distribute your—do you sell your sauce?

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CD: So we have sauce in locations here in Hot Springs. Our biggest client is in Southern California, a company called Surface. They've been around since '37 and they're just a small—well I say small; they're a family operation that's grown tremendously. And they've recently opened a location here in Hot Springs. It's Les and Diana Surface. Les is originally from Culver City, California; Diana is from Sheridan and they meet, marry, she moves out to California but she's always kept—or they've always kept a residence on Lake Hamilton. And so over a period of time she finally convinced her husband that they needed to open up an operation. And they have completely rehabbed a building that was built in the early 1900s. It's about a city block and to date they've spent close to \$4,000,000 on all of the structural items on the building, rehabbing it; it was a former—I believe it was an Edsel dealership. And so it's—it is absolutely amazing what they've done with it. And they have their service provider on any type of restaurant equipment, any type of ingredient, from commercial kitchens to the finest ingredients you would need for a—a five-star dinner. And that's—their main base of operation is in Culver City which is a suburb outside Los Angeles.

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And so they've—they've opened up a site here and they're going to move eventually their e-commerce site here. So they're our—our largest outside of Arkansas—sauce client.

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RRL: And where else in the State—?

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CD: We're here; we're at Weldon's which is Weldon's is another great local spot here in town. They're a high-end meat market; that's where they have everything like the old school meat markets back in the day. And they deal in really nice items that are kind of hard to come by. And they've sold our sauce for a number of years.

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Another spot that just closed down really was Baskin House and they've been around since probably the '60s. And a few of the other mom and pop places, one place in Murphysboro, Hawkins General Store, really just a close-knit group of people and by far Surface is the biggest hitter when it comes to sauce.

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RRL: And I read some reviews of your barbecue especially your chicken got a lot of attention, talking about how good it was. What is your—what meat is your best-seller here?

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CD: Recently it's been the chopped pork, chopped pork like crazy. As far as the lineup that we have, we have beef, pork, ham, ribs, and chicken. And as far as the—when you're thinking sandwiches the majority of the people are going to do the chopped pork or the chopped beef, and then on the weekends it seems like people just throw down on some ribs. Being in the middle of summer, Thursday we have the State Hog Rally, which is Harley's Owners Group, so we should have hopefully 5,000 to 6,000 motorcyclists in Hot Springs. So if you figure 5,000 to 6,000 two people per bike you're looking at maybe 10,000 to 12,000 people coming in for three days.

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If the weather holds we love bikers, because all they can do is eat and drink and buy fuel. And they all have appetites because I've never seen a skinny biker.

00:19:51 **RRL:** Okay; so let's—can we maybe take a walk back—? 00:19:56 **CD:** Yeah; uh-hm. 00:19:57 **RRL:** And look around? 00:20:00 CD: Sure. 00:20:00 **RRL:** I'm going to take some pictures. 00:20:02 **CD:** Okay. 00:20:05

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RRL: I'm trying not to trip on this. I had the hardest time this morning with this cord.

CD: There's all of that.

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RRL: Thank you. Oh I didn't even do the introduction because we got to talking but this is the 27th day of July and I'm Rachel Reynolds Luster and I'm with Chris Dunkel at Stubby's—

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CD: BBQ.

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RRL: —BBQ in Hot Springs and we're talking Arkansas barbecue. So you describe Arkansas barbecue.

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CD: It's—it's a meld between Tennessee and Texas because you have both the beef influence and the pork influence, and of course we do it better than both States, so they come here to enjoy it.

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RRL: I agree. [*Laughs*] We're actually eating—my husband and—and boys we're going down to Texas and then back up the other side of the State, so—.

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CD: Oh really?

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RRL: Uh-oh; you missed him. I think she wanted the deviled eggs.

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CD: We got people coming in. This is where we—I don't know if you want—we'll be putting more stuff on later this afternoon but it's a six-shelf rotisserie with just a wood fire.

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RRL: Okay.

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CD: Are you going to be in town tomorrow?

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RRL: Oh no, we're going—we might come back through after—I never got a hold of Ron at Simms and so I'll have to do that interview on the way back up.

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CD: Okay.

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RRL: So we might come back this way.

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CD: Well you know in the morning that's when I'm preparing everything and this thing is chock full of good stuff, so it's always a good time to get photos with everything ready to go in there. Hey Travis; what's going on? Cool. [Interruption]

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RRL: So do you do the potatoes in the rotisserie?

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CD: We smoke our potatoes; we do the red potatoes on the pit, the baked potatoes on the pit. Everything is cooked on the pit but the cobbler. The cobbler I cook in the oven.

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RRL: Okay; and you said the red potatoes you do for the potato salad?

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CD: Potato salad; yeah. But we've got—I mean everything is—is prepared inside the pit to where it's—everything is smoked and done with TLC.

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RRL: Do you season your meat all before you smoke it?

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CD: Uh-hm; yeah, we have a shaking mix we'll put on there. We'll sauce the ribs down as well. The ribs when they come out they have a beautiful dark crust to them because the sauceanything that is tomato-based will turn black as it cooks, so it has this dark appearance. And when you slice into them, you just—they—they just—they're beautiful.

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RRL: Just fall apart and—?

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CD: Yeah; the beef—you know everything gets a nice dark look to it and once you cut off that outside crust and—. That's really the best part, those outside trimmings, I think because that's

where all of that—the intense flavor is.

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RRL: So tell me about your—your bean pots.

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CD: The bean pots, one of the items that's kept us around since '52. Hey Travis, I appreciate it;

we'll see you later. [Interruption] The bean pot, one of the signature items at Stubby's—ceramic

pot that has the beans in the center, chopped ham on top, and then we smoke them in the pit and

we've only used Betty Jean hams from—forever it seems like. And so it's a really, really one of

our unique items that's kept Stubby's going.

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RRL: Do you—oh go ahead.

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CD: Well as far as between the pot of beans and then our baked potatoes, those are the two items that people always associate Stubby's with.

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RRL: And your beans, do you start out with a certain kind of bean? Do you do those from scratch or—?

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CD: Well we do those from scratch. It—and what's nice about even the—the beans that we—that aren't the pot of beans I still cook those on the pit as well. So all of the juices of everything that's cooking in the meat will drip into the beans and that gets stirred in, so you have just that—all the—those wonderful juices that all mix together. And it gives the beans even a better flavor.

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RRL: Are they like a Great Northern or a Navy Bean or—?

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CD: Just Navy Bean; just pork and beans, so it's—but I'll tell you what. It's—it's the care that you put into it and how you prepare everything and taking the—the extra steps in order to set yourself apart from the others that just buy it in a can that you just pop the seal and you dump it out, so that's what we try to—.

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RRL: That doesn't sound good. [*Laughs*]

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CD: Well no; it takes a little bit of extra effort, your own ingredients and your own wherewithal and just put it together and keep everybody well fed.

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RRL: Can I see your woodpile please?

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CD: Yeah; it's about a 50-shot—50/50 either way we go. Pardon me. [*Interruption*] Did you get a picture of the front?

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RRL: Of the front.

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CD: I was going to open it up but—. (talking to a customer)Yes, ma'am? Regular or general? [*Interruption*] On the egg would you like one-half or two?

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RRL: I'm thinking maybe some pictures outside?

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CD: Did you get a picture of [inaudible]?

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RRL: Yes; I did.

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CD: Did you get a picture of our bullet ridden car door?

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RRL: No. [Laughs] No; I just have the—.

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CD: That was back in my drinking days.

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RRL: Were you riding in it or—?

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CD: No; he said I was speeding. I said I disagree. And it was funny; it was a perfect door that sat up there for over 20 years and in high school I took it down and gave it a little character. Who's that? (talking to a customer) Yeah; heck yeah, I know Susan. We all went to St. John's together. [*Interruption*] Oh yeah; yeah, she—I'm trying to think—that was back—.

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(discussing license plate collection) We're at 100 now; people just bring them in. Now I make them sign them and put them up on the wall. It adds a little character.

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RRL: Yeah; you've got two walls on this—.

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CD: And then when you walk in—yeah the foyer there they're all surrounding it.

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RRL: So people are decorating for you; that's good.

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CD: Yeah; it adds to it. I just tell people that you know it took me years of traveling across the country and stealing plates. I'm wanted in a few of them.

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RRL: And that's how you got the door.

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CD: Yeah; that's how I got the door.

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RRL: So you were saying you shot it up just to add character?

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CD: Oh yeah. [*Interruption*] People just bring them in. You know it—the only one that I've had that someone really wanted to buy, I have an LSU Centennial Plate and I had a guy for years that

would try to come in and buy it from me. But I said you know I've never sold any of my plates. And he'd go oh I'll give you a couple hundred dollars. I go I don't want it; no. I said it just adds—it's part of the store. I said I'm not going to sell it, so the best slogan though for a State is New Hampshire. It's *live free or die*. That's—I've got it over the doorway right over there. Yeah; exactly.

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RRL: So this is your mom?

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CD: Yeah; that's my mother. That's—I remember the day that came out.

00:31:44

RRL: Businesswoman mixing barbecue and cosmetics. [Laughs]

00:31:47

CD: Yeah; that was back in 1988. That was at our other location on Park Avenue. Stubby's started at 1000 Park back in '52 and—and that's at the original location at 1000—.

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RRL: When did it move to this location?

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CD: We opened this location in '78. And so that was a picture of mom back in the day.

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RRL: Is the other building still standing?

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CD: The building is still standing but the property, what happened, the—the family that owned that piece of real estate, the woman, the matriarch of the family passed away. And what they did is they—all the children divvied up what they wanted and what they didn't want they put on the auction block. That part of town and that building itself was—didn't have the integrity; they—they weren't keeping it up as best they could have. So when it—when it came up to be purchased at auction we just stayed as a tenant. Well the gentleman who purchased the property he—he wasn't a very—it was a nice way to say it—he just wasn't a very nice person. And so basically we didn't renew our lease and six months prior to us leaving he tried to have my mother arrested [Laughs] a few times for trespassing. And it was ludicrous. My mother is five-feet tall. She's a little Italian lady, the sweetest thing on earth and the police officers were like don't—don't harass this—. This woman is not breaking the law. So we were very glad to get out of there.

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And we had another location on Park Avenue that we moved to and when we lost our lease there in '90 and so we operated there until—. Well we sold the property in 2003 and opened this one in '78, so this is world headquarters now.

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RRL: And so what—I haven't read the whole article but what's the cosmetics end of this?

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CD: Oh at the time my mother was selling Mary Kay so they just thought it was a nice heading that they had barbecue and Mary Kay.

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RRL: And is she holding the bean pots?

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CD: The bean pots; yeah, she's holding a tray of bean pots. But yeah; she's just a little bitty—little bitty woman.

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RRL: Uh-huh; yeah she doesn't look very threatening.

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CD: Uh-um; no, no, not at all.

00:33:48

RRL: She doesn't look like a trespasser.

00:33:50

CD: No; but yeah that's my mama.

00:33:54

RRL: Well very nice. Well I think I'm going to go take some pictures outside and then—

00:34:02

CD: Cool; we—yeah we had a major fire here in 2007 and we—we were closed for three months. And completely redid everything; and it wasn't a planned—it happened—well actually

it—it was September 11, 2007.

00:34:18

RRL: Oh really?

00:34:19

CD: Yeah; I was at the house. I got the call from my plumber's wife who is at the drive-thru

window at Sonic which is a straight shot right up there. And she said Chris; I don't know how to

tell you this but your—your restaurant is on fire. I was like excuse me? So you—you race here

and I—you know I live about 30 minutes outside of town so I got here in 10 and sure enough; it

was—it was burning and it was two days prior to about 8,000 motorcyclists being in town. It was

our—our big bike rally that we have every year in September. And so it wasn't—I had ordered

everything in and it was—it was a bust. It was a bust. We were closed for—right at three months

and reopened but now it's been revamped.

00:35:07

RRL: What caused the fire?

00:35:08

CD: Pit fire.

00:35:10

RRL: Pit fire?

00:35:11

CD: Uh-hm; wasn't a planned deal but it's—it's an unfortunate piece of the business. You'll have the occasional fire in a barbecue place. But we're back better than ever. Everything has been redone and didn't lose any of the character; just freshened everything up.

00:35:29

RRL: Yeah; looks like it was meant to be.

00:35:31

CD: Yeah.

00:35:33

RRL: Everything looks settled. Okay; well I'm going to run to take some pictures and I'll be back in.

00:35:38

CD: Cool.

00:35:38

[End Chris Dunkel @ Stubby's Interview]