BEN & KAREN BARKER

Chef-Owners, Magnolia Grill - Durham, North Carolina

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Interviewer: Kate Medley
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Kate Medley: I'll start by saying this is Kate Medley interviewing Karen and Ben Barker on the tenth of July, 2011, at their home near Chapel Hill. And I will get one of you to start by introducing yourself; tell us who you are and what you do.

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Ben Barker: I am Ben Barker, and I grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and I currently share responsibility for chefing at Magnolia Grill in Durham with my partner and bride, Karen.

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Karen Barker: And I'm Karen Barker, and I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and moved down here after meeting Ben, to Chapel Hill, and we've been working together for the past thirty years. Magnolia Grill has been around for twenty-five years this November. And ever since we met in culinary school, we've been cooking together ever since.

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KM: And birth dates?

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BB: Why is that pertinent?

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KB: **[*Laughs*]** June 7, 1957.

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BB: December 13, 1953.

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KM: And Ben—

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BB: You're supposed to say "good looking old man" **[*Laughs*]**.

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KM: "Good looking old man" **[*Laughs*]**—Ben, do you want to start by telling us a little bit about the food traditions you grew up with in Chapel Hill?

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BB: I was the child of an academic family. My father was on the faculty at University of North Carolina Dental School; however, both of my parents were raised in Burlington, in Alamance County, the adjacent northwestern county from where we grew up. And their families were the first real families to not live on the farm. As a matter of fact, many facets of both of their families still maintained working farms throughout my childhood and adolescence, so I grew up at a time in life when the extended families still maintained close relationships. We'd go drive up Burlington and hang out with my grandparents virtually every weekend throughout my childhood.

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And as you might expect, those trips revolved around being together, but as—as much as around being together was being together at the table. Most of the cooking on my paternal grandmother's side was very direct farm food; you know, they maintained a garden even though they lived in the city and had a business there. They had moved there at the Depression, to find work in the mills, because farming wasn't hacking it in that period of time. But—and then had made a success of themselves in that; however, they still maintained that relationship and link to the land.

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My grandfather kept a pretty extensive garden and my grandmother's sister and her husband still operated the family farm, which is predominantly a tobacco farm—but subsistence food farm for them as well—at the same time, as well as for the family that sharecropped it with them for the tobacco facet.

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So fundamentally, those meals there drove a lot of my thinking about how to eat in a sort of seasonal way without really realizing it until I became an adult and a chef, because it was always seasonal. It was what was out in the yard, and it was what we were eating. My mother's side was also agrarian in background, but they had more rapidly adopted the urban lifestyle. And her mother was not a particularly great cook, so my mother derived most of her cooking exposure from her mother-in-law, who taught her how to make cornbread and biscuits and peas and butter beans and slow-cooked beans and greens and fried chicken and all the things that, you know, may seem somewhat commonplace, but in fact were the integral elements of the way we thought of food.

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Our grandfather would, you know, raise root vegetables and "Ash" potatoes—which is the way he said "Irish"—and white turnips and their greens, and tomatoes and squash and beans, and it was part of my great, fond memory of walking down there with him barefooted in those sandy rows and, you know, watching him make his selections for that moment's meal.

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Southern cooking in general and Piedmont North Carolina cooking was pretty straightforward and kind of had a—I think a pretty defined English-slash-Germanic influence—Scotch, Irish, which is maybe to say that it wasn't particularly pretty. But it was always very direct and there was often some animal fat involved in the vegetable preparation, if there was any cooking whatsoever. Food was very vegetable-centric. There would be numerous—what you'd call side dishes these days that were really more of the focus of the table, including accompanying pickles—whether they be quick ones, like cucumber and onion or put-up pickles, like chow-chow and bread-and-butters and relishes and that sort.

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And the protein facet was often—and I think this is generational more than anything coming from them, from that Depression Era, you know, unless you had a convenient chicken or a convenient piece of pig nearby, if you had to buy your protein from living in town, which they did, the quantities were smaller. So really it was more about vegetables to us. That's my recollection. And there was always bread. Now they were quick breads, but there was always bread, and it was an incomplete meal without it. They didn't buy store-bought bread except for when it was time to eat a tomato sandwich, but other than that, you know, there was usually biscuits or cornbread on the table.

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You were being instructed in the rhythm of the seasons and that has fully translated to the way that I cook, and the way that I think about the [Carrboro Farmers'] Market.

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KM: When did you start cooking?

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BB: Professionally? Or just—? You know, my mom made an effort early on in life to try and give her children some independence. You know, we had to wash our own laundry and learn how to make certain things. Growing up in the '60s, you know, there was—my mother became a fairly adventuresome cook and was part of the Junior League cookbook, and she was testing all this—so I remember doing a kidney pie that was heinous.

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But the part of her instructional program was to give us a repertoire of certain things that we could fix for ourselves, and as we got close to going off to school, to college, to be in a position to feed ourselves as well. So I'd say, you know, the instruction began, you know, when we were six or seven and moved along.

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I think that we were being instructed by my grandmother at the same time, because she would invite us to stand by her while she was cooking. I watched her fry chicken for ten years before she ever let me actually do it with her. But, the real answer to that is that, you know, in our family, like many others, the meal was centric to the day. And we would be discussing the next meal while we were having that meal. And its preparation and execution was part of the conversation. And it was a given, and there would be reflection on how a specific item was

presenting itself. So I think that you know even though that food was not in any way considered you know something that was totemic or on an altar about the way we did it, it was still really, really key to that family's association—and being around the kitchen was very much part of it.

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So I started cooking well before I actually started handling food, I feel like. Cooking professionally, I fell into, because in North Carolina, growing up in a college town and the restaurant jobs were amongst the easiest jobs to get. And the skill requisite was minimal, and the people who worked in restaurants were fun, and I liked the night hours, so I kept falling back and forth into that realm, 'til finally it grabbed me and took me and said, *this is what you will do*.

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KM: Let's turn to Karen. Similar questions; you want to talk about the food traditions that you grew up around?

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KB: In a lot of ways, I think my family couldn't have been more different than Ben's—from New York, and Eastern European Jewish family on both sides. My parents were first-generation Americans. My dad was the country boy; he grew up in Upstate New York. My grandparents actually had a chicken farm up there. And my mom was the big-city girl; she was from Brooklyn.

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We actually did live Upstate for about the first maybe five years of my life, on the farm with my grandparents. And so I have vague recollections of that: you know, being in the chicken

coops and chasing the peeps around. And there was, you know, always the fresh corn and the fresh tomatoes, going blueberry picking—that sort of thing.

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My mom's family, though, was actually—I think—even more food-centric. For my paternal grandparents it was more—they grew the food, they put it on the plate, but I don't think there was that absolute joy kind of thing of my mother's family where, in fact, life totally revolved around food. That was pretty infectious, I think. Every meal was important. We never ate processed foods. Things were shopped for almost on a daily basis. My grandmother lived upstairs from us, and she often would prepare the meals. My mom worked by the time we moved back to Brooklyn.

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And my grandmother was a terrific cook, really terrific cook. I got to come home for lunch from school and there was always a hot lunch on the table for me, which I remember very fondly.

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The one thing that we were always told to never skimp on in life and never deny yourself was food. In other words, you could have money for very little else, and they were pretty frugal about a lot of things, but always whatever was really freshest and seasonal and delicious, you know, that was definitely on the table—with again, a heavy kind of emphasis, I would say, more on fruits and vegetables than actual proteins. But like because of the Jewish background, I don't think I ate pork until I was maybe 10. I remember being on a road trip actually down south to visit—I had an uncle who ran Jewish delis in Miami, and we drove down to visit him and I remember we ate in a diner and it was the first time I ever got to eat bacon **[*Laughs*]**, which has made a *lifelong* impression on me!

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But you know, meals were always very simple, I think. Sundays, again, were resolved for family get-togethers. We had extended family who lived within the neighborhood. Everybody would go over to one another's house on a Sunday. You never had people in without some sort of food being on the table, you know. Somebody would stop in just for coffee and then out would come the array of cakes kind of thing.

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It being New York, kitchens were really small, and so we grew up with the tradition of eating out also, as well as, you know, cooking good at home. Really great ethnic eating, lots of good Italian food, Chinese food, Jewish deli right up the block; there was a bakery on every corner. So it was, I'd say, simple, urban eating at its finest in a lot of ways, and that's what really got me interested in food. My grandmother was a great baker, and I think that that's where that gene came from. It was not my mother; my mother was a fairly utilitarian cook. We used to call her "Queen of the Broilers"—broiled chicken, broiled lamb chops **[*Laughs*]**, you know all that sort of thing—very simple, you know. It was good. But it was my grandmother who really had the fine hand, particularly with baking. And she was one of those bakers who was very instinctual, never measured; you know she used to say a cup of this, a pinch of that, and for a while we would—once I got a little bit older—try and stand next to her and measure things out, which was sort of semi-successful. We got a few of her recipes down.

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But I don't know how she did it. Her stuff would come out just great every time kind of thing.

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And I think I started playing around on my own baking maybe when I was about 10 or 12 when I started realizing that you can do that and feed that to people and they'd be very impressed and happy kind of thing—it was like seal of approval. So my mother would have mahjong games you know with her friends like once a week and I would do the baking for that rather than getting something from the bakery. So that was probably my first foray into that sort of thing.

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KM: What would you bake?

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KB: Cookies; I tried Danish one time, which to me, if you think about it, is pretty involved. I can't believe I ever did that, but they came out, and they were really good. Coffee cakes—my grandmother made a Russian-style coffee cake that I learned how to make from her that was really a favorite in the family; cheesecakes, my father and my cousin would have cheesecake cook-offs kind of thing. They went to perfect their cheesecake recipe. It probably took them about four or five years so we ate cheesecake every week for like five years, I think, until they got the recipe *just* right. And it's a really great cheesecake recipe, gotta say. It's one that I base a lot of what I do in terms of cheesecakes now on.

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And, you know, there were things like, you know, what else do I remember—Carvel ice-cream cakes was probably one of the, you know, more commercial things that would hit the table—that and maybe Entenmanns which was a commercially baked line of baked goods that was popular up in New York, reserved for kind of semi-special occasions, I think. But, you know, when it came to baking, that was always *my* focus—a little bit on cooking but it was really

the pastry and sweet end of things that kind of got me excited. And I kind of tucked that away in my mind for the longest of times, I think, until I went off to college, learned how to cook for myself, did a really good job of what you could do in a little, you know, dorm room with a toaster oven and a hot plate kind of thing, and turned out some pretty good meals, which again impressed all the boys on the hall, so that was gratifying.

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And when it came time to sort of figure out—I was a junior and going, "okay, what am I going to do next?"—you know, "what's the next step here?"—you know, and my parents wanted me to—I don't know—be a pharmacist, I think **[*Laughs*]**. I don't know where that came from. I think they felt it would be normal hours. They were academics and I didn't really want to go into teaching. I thought about going onto grad school. I was a history major and at the time there were a lot of cutbacks going on, and all of my professors were telling me, "You'll be crazy if you take that path at this point. You know, it's not the right time to do it."

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And I stumbled upon an article about the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, and thought, "well, this sounds potentially really interesting. You can make a living off of cooking. I really like to cook, and I love to bake, and I'm going to check this out."

And in New York at the time, there was a small group of women who were really making a pretty big name for themselves in terms of female chefs, and I think it was a time in general, back in the '70s, I guess—the late '70s—where American food was breaking apart from the French tradition. People were taking American ingredients and making it ingredient-focused, employing regional cooking techniques and kind of New American cuisine was being born, so to speak.

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So after reading about the success of these women, I just found the whole idea of it really intriguing. And after a visit to the school, I just thought, "You know, this is for me; I've definitely got to do this." And so that's where my focus was for the next two years. And I met Ben the first day of class. We sat down next to each other in Sanitation. **[*Laughs*]** And we've seriously been cooking together ever since then, so—.

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KM: In Sanitation class?

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KB: In Sanitation class, very romantic. **[*Laughs*]**

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BB: E-coli.

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KM: How do you remember that day, Ben?

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BB: You know, I remember the instructor who was charged with trying to make a class on food-borne illness exciting, and you know how you handle rats in your future professional life and—. **[*Laughs*]** But you know, we did sit next to each other and engaged with each other that first day. And within six weeks we had become a couple, which was interesting. And we really pursued the culinary degree program with the idea that we would go off together and have a restaurant.

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And it's unusual to feel that directed from the outset of an academic pursuit. But we were so jazzed, I feel, about the CIA and the opportunity that it presented us; the knowledge potential felt unlimited. We were being taught classical technique and structure, but it was a very exciting time. This really—as Karen indicated, this felt much like the gestation period of American food, the late '70s and 1980. There were a few American chefs who were starting to get some acknowledgement for what they were doing. And so it was a very vibrant feeling that Karen and I said, you know, we were on a mission for ourselves. "You know, we'll garner as much knowledge as we can out of this program and go off to work, and then at some point we'll be able to do our own place."

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And so we really pursued that culinary education with that, you know, goal in mind, you know, that we'd extract as much as we could that would enable us to be successful when and if we were ever able to open our own restaurant.

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And, you know, to have your relationship for life sort of founded on a mutual passion for not only each other but for an art and a craft has enabled us to, I think, you know, always have something to reach for with each other. We share our cooking, you know, not just in work but at home and it permeates our life in a way that's constantly gratifying and rewarding. So I consider us extremely lucky to have found something that we like to do and love to do with each other.

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KM: In those early days of your relationship with one another and in Culinary School, what do you remember of your early dreams for a restaurant together?

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KB: Um, you know at the time, I think we were reading a lot about what Alice Waters was doing out in California. And that sounded really intriguing to have a seasonally based restaurant where the menu was limited and changed all the time and was always based on what was best and freshest. And new product that was generated by, you know, farmers playing around with things, and having it be very farm-centric. I always found that really intriguing.

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And at the same time as that, we were reading a little bit about a guy named Bill Neal, who, at the very same time, was doing the very same thing, not getting quite as much press for it, but he was doing it in North Carolina. And Ben was from North Carolina. When it came time to graduate and think about, "Okay what's the next step?" we almost literally tossed a coin and said, "Are we going to the West Coast—to California—or are we going back to North Carolina?" Because in our minds, we could probably do that sort of thing in either place. And we decided because Ben had family here to try and come back to North Carolina.

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And I think that those two restaurants [*editor's note: Waters's Chez Panisse and Neal's La Residence*] were very instrumental in how we thought about developing our own restaurant, wouldn't you say?

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BB: Both restaurants were chef-driven, and in that the chef was the proprietor. In fact it was a partnership in both of those examples. And the chefs sort of directed the day-to-day conceptualization from the moment the restaurant opened in the morning until it closed at night.

And the degree of passion and understanding about what a restaurant could be was very much defined for Karen and I really by Bill. We wanted to work for him. This story has become apocryphal, but we both wanted to work for him when we graduated and he would not hire culinary school grads because he felt that those individuals might not be receptive to his style of cooking or how he might want things to happen; they might bring their own ideas in there. Anyway, he did not want—but his approach to doing a restaurant was *exactly* and *precisely* what both of us envisioned ourselves doing: chef-created food. The menu was decided by the kitchen. It was a daily menu. We would create it based on the best available ingredients and it was, you know, almost in many respects the European model, but extrapolated through the American and regional vernacular.

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And it was both Bill and—I don't think Bill was influenced by Alice Waters; that's just the way that he grew up and thought about that it should be the right way to do. He was more influenced by the French model, but that being said, you know, he really defined the way that American chefs have come to cook. He was years and years ahead of his time in many, many respects.

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So that model has been pervasive. We did ultimately cook in La Residence after he left, with a number of Bill's acolytes who remained, and learned his mechanisms and his approach and his style and his overall philosophy to daily kitchen management that we have continued to utilize many of the best aspects of that ever since.

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When we moved onward from there to Fearrington House in our first leadership role, it was—it was a La Residence–style kitchen, which was the name of Bill Neal's restaurant. It was

again very seasonal, very agrarian oriented; it was a menu that was farm-to-table before it was, you know, so hip to say that it's farm-to-table. And it felt extremely correct to me to be back in my Central Piedmont homeland and cooking with the ingredients that, you know, I had grown up seeing, but employing them with my still-developing refinement of culinary technique.

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And so it was a marvelous way to sort of assimilate what we'd learned in school and learned through our experience in various cooking circumstances, particularly La Residence, and build that into the sort of foundation that gave us the strength and the conviction that we could do our own gig, that we could open our own restaurant; that we could take this sort of mindset and comfort level with the ingredients that we knew and the technical skills that we were developing and put them into a restaurant environment and be unique for that time. And so it actually happened way quicker than we thought it would, because we opened the Grill four years out of school.

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Many people come out and do it on their own, but I'm glad we had that gestated period. It gave us a lot of opportunities to make mistakes, and we're in debt to Moreton Neal and to R.B. Fitch for you know providing us with the platforms to develop the skills to go and open our own place and be successful.

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KM: Tell us about how Magnolia Grill came to be, four years out of Culinary School?

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BB: Do you want to do that Karen?

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KB: I think you should start.

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BB: Okay; how much truth do we want in this?

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KB: **[*Laughs*]**

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BB: You know, I was—like many young chefs, a little bit more self-confident than I probably should have been. And I had a pretty clear image of what I wanted to do, how I wanted to cook, the food I wanted to present, and the style of the operation as a whole, including service and how that should manifest itself. You know, that the servers needed to really understand about the food, about its sourcing, about even if they didn't know how to cook it, I wanted them to know the process so that they could really relate to the guests and be, you know, fully informed when they were at the table.

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At Fearrington House, when we were in that leadership role, we did a really good job of taking a number of front-of-the-house individuals who didn't really have a tremendous exposure to food and giving them the knowledge base and the confidence to be able to do that. But I was not particularly patient with those who weren't invested in that approach because, you know, we were an expensive restaurant. We felt that the guests deserved that sort of attention. There was a

diverse client base out there, absolutely, as there remains today in the Triangle. And so when some servers didn't fulfill that investment in what we considered—perhaps overly so—really important, they occasionally would be lambasted for their lack of investment.

Anyway, we were a little frustrated at one point, and we had been driving over to Durham to shop in this store that was about a year and a half old, two years old at that point, maybe almost three, called Wellspring Grocery. [*Editor's note: Wellspring Grocery opened in 1981.*] Wellspring has since been sold, and it's part of the Whole Foods Group, but their founders, Ann and Lex Alexander, had gone to California and seen the light and wanted to come back and do a grocery that featured sustainable local produce, grains, healthy—you know—what am I trying to say—the facial supplies and things like that. I mean, they really were trying to do things in a really good way and it was located in a former grocery store on the west side of Durham and it was just a really neat space.

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And when you walked in there and—it was really, really sort of astonishing in a way, because the—I said to Karen, "This place would make a great restaurant." I mean, we walked in the front door and hadn't even gone through the store even at that point. And we continued to come back. And at one point we finally went over to Lex, who would sit up in his little open office, and we said, "If you ever decide to move, let us know."

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And they had been growing their dream in a good way and had found another location just up the street that was bigger and enabled them to expand the store and its offerings and Lex was also ahead of his time in his thinking about food and sourcing it, and putting it out there for people to expand their palates and he called and said, "We're moving. Are you interested?" And

it was one of those days when I think we were—I was a little cranked off about something, and so we said, "Yes, we're interested."

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KB: Yes.

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BB: And it was one of the few things that we've done pretty much—you know we knew we were going to do it, it was our goal to do it, and when it was presented to us we said, "Let's go." And five months later, the restaurant was underway. The process of, you know, underwriting it and putting it together and developing it, and we did all the renovation of the space ourselves with our two partners and it was a very magical time because you know, you built the restaurant and then six months later you opened the doors and four years out of school we had the dream.

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Twenty-five years later, we're still thrilled with that dream. You know, I hope that the young people who pursue that dream figure out what they're going to do after that. Most of them now have a better idea.

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KM: So the Grill opened in what year?

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BB: Nineteen eighty-six; go ahead.

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KB: Yeah; November of ’86.

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KM: And tell us a bit about the food you were serving and where that was coming from and how the community was receiving it.

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KB: Well, when we opened we had already had quite a number of connections made from working at both La Residence and Fearrington House with local farmers, the local fish dealers, so sourcing for us was in a way surprisingly easy for that time. And because the menu changed a lot: I mean, especially when we first opened we would change the menu sometimes every day depending on what was available to us.

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We were pretty fearless about that I think. Sometimes consistency was not **[*Laughs*]** perhaps what it should have been as a result, but it was always exciting, I think. And I think people were jazzed by the fact that we were so excited about what we were doing that we were really seeking out the things, particularly if they were locally produced that were kind of as well made as they could be or as well grown as they could be.

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Certainly our relationships with a number of the farmers that came out of the Carrboro Farmers Market at the time was extremely integral in how we approached food. I know Ben always said that he built his menu really vegetables first. It was all about the vegetables and the plate accompaniments, and then the main dish items and the proteins came afterwards. And so

that was something that really we were focused on from the get-go, from when we were cooking down here.

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KM: Introduce us to the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

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BB: You know, when I first started going to the Carrboro Market as a cook at La Residence in 1981, the summer of '81, it was a seasonal market. It was in the old covered parking lot behind—one block behind Main Street, and there were about 10 vendors there. Amongst those 10 I think two of them were not even really selling produce. I mean one, of them was Jane Filer, who was—you know, she's a well-considered artist now—but she was like frying donut holes or something off the back of a pickup truck. Stoned as a goat, too. I'm telling you. Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m. she would be *high*, high.

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But there were about eight growers there: Bill Dow, who has been one of the daddies in here; Ken Dawson shortly thereafter; Howard and Louise Pope, who really were tobacco farmers and also truck farmers that sold all the produce that I knew from growing up, but it was—. Dan Graham, another person. It was a fairly small market, reasonably well supported by the food intelligentsia—which is the precursors to current foodies, I guess. Mostly academics, as well as some of the resident population that lived in Carrboro and on the periphery of Chapel Hill.

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But there were few restaurant shoppers that sought that Market out. But Bill [Neal] had really defined that as part of the way that La Residence would operate. And so Bill Smith, who

was cooking with us at that time, and Sherry Kline, who was the kitchen manager at that time, carried that mantra along with them and said, you know, "This is the way we'll define the menu, is we'll go to the Market and see what's there and then we'll build what we're going to cook today out of what we find on Saturdays." It was a once-a-week market, and so it was somewhat limiting. There was another little truck market across the street from the restaurant that we resourced from. But the Carrboro Market was, you know, still in its nascent stages at that point.

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But what we found interesting was that the growers were receptive to the cooks that would come to the Market. They were interested in what—we obviously represented higher-volume purchasing, maybe more consistency because we were there week after week. And so Dan Graham was a great example of someone who was growing traditional beans, and—green beans, that is—and I had said, "You know, we can't get any *haricots verts*. I was wondering, would you consider trying to grow those?" And he said, "Well, sure; I'll try that." And was rewarded by finding that not only did we buy them, but the other clients bought them. And it sort of is like an example of how the restaurants stimulated the growing of a particular product that then became—the farmer could charge more for that bean. It was a little bit more labor intensive. They could get more return on their per-pound investment of labor. And it was really because the farmers were really interested in what we wanted to buy in volume, they were more receptive to working with the restaurants and it really was a marvelous symbiosis that we encouraged because it benefited us. We were excited about food and the opportunities to get more variety in our menus, to maintain, you know, that level of having things that—in restaurants that you couldn't get at home. Now everybody can get everything at home and it's almost a greater challenge to cook now than it was then. We were able to be in the lead a lot of times with

ingredients. Things that people had seen in European markets or California markets were now starting to be found in the Carrboro Market.

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More importantly still, that Market represented for us a way to maintain an absolute finger on the pulse of the rhythm of the season, and so that you're always cooking at the time when things were at their best. And you may well know that if you are handling an ingredient at its peak of perfection, then often you're in a great position to succeed with that finished product. And as a consequence, our food became better as we became more reliant, more insistent that the growers provide us with you know what we were looking for.

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And there was also, just at about that time in the early '80s at the Market, a couple of new young growers who were coming in who were really looking at them—at the Farmers Market as an opportunity to make a lifestyle choice: to own some land, and to not work for someone else; to direct their own lives. Both of those professions: farmers—farming, and cooking—chefing, are very labor and time intensive. And so we found fairly early on that we shared a lot of the work ethic, the understanding of how hard you work would translate into the end-result and became very good friends and cultivated marvelous enduring relationships with the people that grew stuff for us. Alex and Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farm are now lifelong friends.

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There's some old folks that were part of that developmental period for us, Auburn Isley was our tomato man for the first 10 years. [***Sighs***] You know, and you—and you miss people sometimes. **[*Emotional*]** Howard and Louise Pope,—excuse me [***Clearing throat***]—were like my grandparents; you know it's like they—that moment on Saturday of going to the Market was an opportunity to not only secure the things that we wanted to invigorate our cooking, but also to

renew—[***Coughs***] excuse me—renew that relationship with the land, because we weren't on it. It was the touching of beautiful produce. It was, you know, feeling like you could pick the nicest things to put in front of people.

00:43:35

And it has continued to drive the way we think about food, because it's just—that connection, constantly—it's almost more important to me in a way, the sourcing, the buying, the touching, the selecting, the conversation about rain and drought and pests and—including the human ones—that has enabled us to continue really derive a tremendous amount of pleasure out of the, you know, the organic process of being a cook. I think I went away from what you asked. **[*Laughs*]** Sorry about that; I hadn't thought about Auburn.

00:44:32

KM: Karen do you want to tell us about maybe y'all's Market routine? Tell us about a Saturday.

00:44:42

KB: These days—

00:44:44

BB: I think you should talk about it how it was and how it is.

00:44:47

KB: Yeah; it does differ a little bit of how it originally was, I think. Originally we really would go and literally shop the Market spur-of-the-moment. There was often something new and different that somebody was trying in terms of growing that if you got there early enough—and

initially, we were some of the early birds kind of thing—you could snap up because there would only be so many raspberries there that day or that sort of thing.

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As people's farming methods progressed and, I think, became a little bit more streamlined and economical and organized, so did our menu planning. And what would happen is we would get together actually off-season with some people—Alex and Betsy, primarily, but a couple of the others—and almost go through seed catalogs and say, "Hey, you know, can you try this this season? You know, you did those really great red onions last year; is there any way that can try cipollini onions?"—kind of thing. And so we would almost kind of order up the produce six months in advance, and kind of think about what, potentially, we could do with it.

00:45:53

Because our volume at the restaurant was growing—under necessity have to pre-order and reserve certain things. So that meant calls in the middle of the week, and Ben had this kind of all-seeing, all-knowing, amazing way of knowing when that stuff was ready to be pulled from the field. There were times when he knew, before the farmers were even out there checking, whether or not the beans were filled out enough, you know, to be picked; or the lettuces were, you know, just right—or that sort of thing.

00:46:25

So there was a little bit more, "We're going to plan a couple days ahead and see what the business patterns are like, and predict and order." And then it became a little bit more of just picking up kind of thing. These days we get to go a little bit later because that's how we operate. If you're an early bird now, you have to be at the Market by 7:00 **[*Laughs*],** which—we'd like to sleep in a little bit on Saturdays, so we tend to pre-order **[*Laughs*]** and then pick up. So it's a little bit different. But it's that rhythm of kind of doing a circuit of the Market to see if there was

something that was out there that we hadn't really planned on being out there or something that catches your eye or sometimes something that we want to cook at home that's not necessarily on the restaurant's menu and then all of these standing orders that we have with people.

00:47:19

And to know that, you know, Ben will be very specific. I mean he's highly specific about his orders, particularly now: it's tomato season, and so we're dealing with, I don't know, probably a dozen different varieties of tomatoes. And it's literally, you know, three pounds of this tomato and two-and-a-half pounds of this tomato and, you know, four pints of, you know, a certain type of cherry tomato and half a dozen pints of another sort of thing.

00:47:41

So it's still a very social occasion I think for us, though, because you don't get to see these people that much in-season but for the Farmers' Market. Sometimes off-season, you know, we might get together for dinner or that sort of thing every once in a while. And again, our relationship with the Hitts, I think, has translated in a marvelous way, because we've actually even traveled with them a couple of times: once to Italy and once to Spain. And that was really fun, because when you talk about looking at produce and sort of putting your heads together as to what could be done and what couldn't be done, I think, one of the best things was, you know, Alex is like a pepper master kind of thing. That's one of the things that he specializes in.

00:48:23

And so when we were in Spain we were looking at new Spanish pepper varieties to bring back. And in Italy, you know, Betsy was like really jazzed about a certain Italian sauce tomato that they, you know, are developing and now selling at the Market. And so that's really wonderful when you're kind of sitting down at the table and you're having this meal and you're

saying, "Oh look at this particular radicchio. Oh, we'd love to have something like this." And then there it is. **[*Laughs*]**

00:48:52

KM: In the late '80s and into the '90s and now even, how did the community respond to both your ever-changing menus and new produce that was maybe unfamiliar to them?

00:49:15

BB: I would say that, you know, in the early '90s, the Market was really starting to achieve a significant presence in the community. Carrboro Market was still the only real, local farmers' market in the Triangle area at that point. You know, obviously since then, there's been a number of markets that follow that model, but they still are reasonably restrictive in their bylaws about who can grow there and what you can produce there. But it was still mostly just almost everything that was available at the Market was grown by those farmers. There was not as many others craftspeople, although I guess Sherry started about mid'90s right with her woven things. And there was you know one person doing baked goods.

00:50:25

KB: The pound cake lady.

00:50:27

BB: The pound cake lady and that kind of thing. But what really happened was that marvelous symbiosis that I spoke of previously, you know, we would invite farmers to grow new things. They would say, "I'm growing this; what do you think of this?" Does this—and the customer

response to it you know is—is palpable. You could really tell in summer season, like yesterday's Market, the July 9th Market, 2011, was, I would say, the peak summer Market. Were you there yesterday? Okay; well you should have been. Because it was—you could just—it's like the most robust beautiful woman you've ever seen. Everything is just really *bursting* and *full* and *vibrantly colorful* and you know it's that kind of feel—it's—there's an energy; it's palpable. It's really astounding to be—to see how it is in that season.

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And you take that food and you put it in your restaurant and you can feel it as a cook. People feel the same way about it. They say, "This is so good." And it's not because we're any good as cooks, although we're accomplished, but it's really because the ingredients are so great. Well, this was starting to really be something that people had acknowledged, you know the press was doing it but people were really starting to feel that there was a genuine reward for supporting the growers at the Carrboro Market, you know, that the payback was so demonstrable that they really could understand the value of developing that relationship. And the Market grew and responded to that, you know, became more and more vendors.

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People would see things on our menu and say, "Where do I get that?" you know, and then they'd want to go and shop for it at the Market. And so it really was a great period of growth for it. As far as how our menu was going, you know, we were—that was probably the most exalted period of American regional cooking in the early '90s, I guess. You know there were—particularly cooks in the South were finally getting some sort of acknowledgement that, you know, our type of food, our interpretation of the food that we knew and had been presenting to our guests was sophisticated enough to deserve some introspection. So other people would look at it and say, "Well, you know, Frank Stitt is really cooking some really cool food down in

Birmingham, you know. It's—Louis Osteen is, you know, testifying in Charleston; that Karen Barker makes some of the most phenomenal fruit and pie permutations you'll ever have in your life—in your life, ice cream that surpasses whatever you could imagine ice cream could be."

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And so to kind of reach that level where what we were doing was, I think, considered on the national plane as good as you could find in the best cities, was really reflective of what we were able to secure from the Market, I think. You know it drove it; it made it happen for us. And as it became, you know, a more extended market and started in the early spring and went into the late fall, it started to expand the horizons. The growers around here started to really realize that—and now it is a year-round market, but that we—they could do more things that this climate enabled them to generate more income from their land other than just the summer product.

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And that—and again, consequence enhanced what we were able to do. You know, we were able to cook in the regional farmers' vernacular for nine months out of the year and it translates it. It's always been intertwined. The relationship is like that moonflower vine out there; you know it's—the trellis is there and the foundation is there and we just curl around each other, seeking the sunlight.

00:54:45

It's just been really part of what's made it for us. Now, I think that the Carrboro Market is distinctive for the—what it's established as a type of representative style of market. You know, I think the Durham Market is a great market. But we have so many relationships in Carrboro that even though our business is in Durham, we still perpetuate that Carrboro relationship.

00:55:15

I think the other really transformative moment for Carrboro is when the farmers realized that they could sell meat, and that really changed the grower profile. First, for many of them, they were able to do that in addition to their produce. And basically, many of them realized that the more something weighs, the more money you get for it. And meat weighs more than a lot of produce. And secondly, that hogs are easy to raise for the most part, and that well-raised hogs taste good, and people like knowing where their animals come from.

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Poultry has been more difficult just by virtue of the fact that processing is difficult here. And processing is difficult for meat and poultry, but it's even more so for that, and that's unfortunate. But the meat side of it has really transformed a lot of the Market, because I think there's—besides the number of growers who do both, there's some people who specialize just in meat and have proven to be very successful with bison and lamb and goats and things of that nature. So I see it's just all of the sudden, the Market is becoming much more complex. You know there's prepared foods there now. April McGreger has—does really marvelous things with canned and pickled items. And you can get a pretty damn fancy hotdog at the Carrboro Market.

00:56:43

KB: And delicious. **[*Laughs*]**

00:56:48

BB: I mean, I don't know if I always want hotdog breath at 10:00 a.m. on Saturday morning, but it's really good. **[*Laughs*]**

00:56:53

So you know it's interesting to see, particularly having just gone and experienced the Ferry Market in San Francisco last week, you know where a lot of our measure of our region is founded on what we thought Northern California was doing with food; the comparables are appropriate, that really we do as good a job and we provide a lot of the same exceptional level of ingredients. We're not there on fruit and stone fruit—

00:57:27

KB: We're getting there though.

00:57:29

BB: —but, you know, there are some people who are doing some great things with fruit. Lyon Farm is magnificent for berries and peaches and some other things. So we're moving in that direction and so it's pretty exciting to see that people aren't just sitting still with it.

00:57:49

Ten years ago, we could never get a fava bean; this year we got all the fava beans we wanted, and more. The growers are responsive to the cooks and to the regular public these days. And they're making, I hope, a good living out of it, because you know it is extraordinarily hard work and they are subject to the vagaries of the weather, but I think they really got—they're figuring it out now—and some people extremely so.

00:58:19

KB: Yeah; and you know, people have become vegetable geeks in a way. I mean it used to be that okay, you can go to the market and find beets. Well now you can find six different varieties of beets. There might be, you know, four different cucumbers from the same person. Lots of

people are growing onions, and there's so many different kinds. I mean, stuff that you didn't see for the longest time, now you're starting to see. So there's always something new. There is always something different.

00:58:43

I mean, Ben went back after reading an article about fava leaves—like the leaves off of fava bean plants—how in California, people are using them for salads and cooking them. And he said to one of his farmers, he said, "So what do you do with those leaves off the fava plants?" And he said, "Well, we get rid of them. Why?" And he says, "Well, you know you can be selling those." And so I guarantee that next year you'll be seeing fava bean leaves at the Market, so—.

00:59:10

KM: Are y'all seeing other chefs at the Market?

00:59:12

KB: Oh yeah.

00:59:14

BB: Unquestionably. You know there's a—we don't take responsibility for it, but we do know that there's a lot of smart people, cooking around here, some of whom came through us and some of whom came from other places. But that market-to-table philosophy is pervasive. You almost can't *not* do that and be considered legitimate. Whether that's valid or not, it really is, I think, a fundamental underlying belief amongst most young cooks and chef-owners, chef-proprietors: shop the Market. The ones that work with us know the value of that. But there's other leaders in that same regard who had no relationship whatsoever.

01:00:09

You know, Andrea Reusing is a great example of someone who is firmly entrenched in that philosophy and it delivers on the plate for her. But, you know, there's lesser—. I mean, Mama Dip is still coming to the Market, and you know, she has to use a cane, but she still comes to the Market. [*Editor's note: Mama Dip is the nickname of Mildred Council, who owns Mama Dip's restaurant in Chapel Hill*.] I'm waiting until I get my handicapped parking space over there—which won't be long, I don't think. **[*Laughs*]**

01:00:37

But you know, the thing about it is you do see tons of chefs there. The Wednesday Market is a really great example of it because you actually see more of our compatriots at that Market, just because it's a shorter market and people have to get back for service. So they don't have quite the same window of time to do their shopping and picking up, and so—and we see, you know, Durham chefs at the Wednesday Market in Carrboro, even. So it is—and I think it's just—it's the foregone conclusion it's not an effort. It's not hard to do. You have to be organized and you have a responsibility to the farmer if you ask for something to be there for it.

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But and you need to pay your bills, but you know it's just—it's part of the ritual. And we feel like every generation of chef that's moved through our kitchen has seen that you know it delivers, you know that it is substantial, the difference that it makes when they don't have to rely on commercial produce that doesn't have an identity, that doesn't have a human being that belongs to it, you know. And you know as far as our ingredient selection, I mean it's expanded so much; our eggs are so much better now than they've ever been. You know, we can make a pig that was raised on the way from Chapel Hill Creamery into twenty different things, and it all translates and it has that immediacy of coming from next door. We've seen the animal grow up,

but it has—even more than that it has a real transparency of porky flavor that makes it singular. And so you know I just feel like we're living in the golden age of professional cooking in a lot of ways in America.

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Where we'll go from here, you know, I'm not really sure what'll happen in the next—in the next ten years as far as that goes. But you know, it has been a pretty magnificent place to be as a cook in the evolution and the association between our philosophy and approach to cooking and the Market here in Carrboro.

01:03:02

KM: As the Carrboro Market has expanded and the number of farmers' markets in the Triangle area has grown substantially, what are the growing pains that the Carrboro Market specifically faces? What challenges are there?

01:03:20

KB: You know, I really wish that they could get this meat processing thing worked out. And it's a whole rigmarole of, you know, government regulations and paperwork and red tape I know because I do think that to totally transform things, I think that protein angle would be just absolutely key. I mean, when you're in Europe you go to small farms that, you know, slaughter happens on a weekly basis without any hassle kind of thing. That, you know, they're very specific about how the animals are raised, and how they're processed and then how they're sold. It could be traced back.

01:04:01

And I'd love to be able to see that same thing here so that people could do it in perhaps slightly larger quantity, because I think that in fact is very doable, but the processing part of it makes it difficult.

01:04:16

BB: I would also say that there's, you know, with the expanding market thing, there's been a little bit of dilution of Carrboro's Market, because what we see—even with the breadth of availability—that a lot of the growers grow the same things. You know, they see what's successful and some are less willing to be experimental now than they used to be, with certain exceptions. There are a few people who are really, you know, trying to press the envelope and see how much they can grow and what they can deliver and what will the Market support?

01:04:55

A great example is the Brinkleys, who have a wealth of vegetable selection, but they also are growing wheat for whole-wheat flour, and corn for meals, and they have just a marvelous selection of various finished pork products, including sausages and ground meats and things of that nature. And I think they really are sort of providing the one-stop shopping opportunity there.

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I think that really the next steps for our Market would—that I would really love to see, that's going to be difficult because of the way the state sanitation laws are currently written, is that it would be nice to be able to get some prepared foods at the Market. You know, that's the one thing that we've also seen in other Markets internationally and in other regions where you can go and get some—a finished something to eat.

01:06:05

I mean, I've already suggested to Alex Hitt that I would love to have a bar at the Market and be the first person to be able to give you a delicious Bloody Mary at 10 o'clock on Saturday morning **[*Laughs*]**, but I think we're a ways away from that ever happening. But you know I do think that the next step is to try and expand what is available there so that again the audience is constantly renewed and enhanced.

01:06:40

KM: Can y'all give us an idea of what was on the menu at Magnolia Grill last night and how the Market bounty entered the menu?

01:06:56

KB: Green tomato soup, which is a standard of ours, an oldie but a goodie that it's so good it keeps returning year after year.

01:07:05

BB: Corn chowder. We do a tomato sampler plate from three different producers—that's three different growers—that does have actually fourteen different varieties on it, with Chapel Hill Creamery mozzarella, so it's sort of—it's like "Carrboro Caprese." You know, the ingredients aren't always in the front of the menu; they're often more as I and Karen indicated to you earlier, the components develop the menu in that way.

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You know we're thick with beans and shelling beans right now, snap beans of various types. There's braised Romano beans that are crazy-delicious. Corn is really starting to come on. Tomatoes have become more and more integral to every dish, and so peppers and chilis are

really starting to make their component, cucumbers—I'm just trying to think about everything that I picked up yesterday. It is—

01:08:26

KB: That ham and head cheese plate?

01:08:29

BB: Well you know is that a function of the Market? It sort of is, so—. Well yeah, it's a Chapel Hill Creamery pig that became a ham, that's twenty-four months old that's served with baby butter beans and then a head cheese made from an acorn-fed, whey-fed hog, and so it's a pretty straight-up market plate. You know but it doesn't announce itself that way. It's just, everything on it is immediately from here.

01:09:04

And yet, you know, if you think of a ham that takes two years to get to the point where you can serve it, you know there's some association with my uncle who cured hams. And that feeling of treasuring an animal enough to invest twenty-four months, and realizing a really marvelous end-result.

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KB: So, and then even some of the background items that we have, come winter season even, let's say, where everything is not available immediately. What we often do is kind of store and preserve. So yes, we've taken shelling beans in the height of shelling bean season and stocked our freezer with them so we can still use them. You know lots of—right now we're thick into

pickling at the restaurant. Next week is pickle week, because we've got about six different projects planned. So we can pull those out in December and January.

01:10:03

Desserts right now, it's all about the berries. I just went and picked blackberries because that's my preferred kind of way of spending two hours out at Lyon Farm, and so I come back with enough berries for, you know, at least half the week kind of thing. Blueberries, we're still into. Peaches are coming on. So it's—we don't have *everything* in the dessert realm, but as much as we possibly can, you know great mint-chocolate chip ice cream with mint from my garden right now. So there's always something you know delicious and wonderful and garden fresh.

01:10:41

BB: I was just going to say blackberry vodka. **[*Laughs*]**

01:10:50

KM: What have I not asked y'all about that is pertinent to this conversation?

01:10:59

KB: Maybe the lineage, which I find really interesting because just as we've sent a lot of young cooks off into the world who now have their own really wonderful restaurants and—not just strictly restaurants, but bakeries, or, you know—

01:11:13

BB: Butchers.

01:11:14

KB: —butchers, whatever they're doing, the same for the farmers. The older generation of farmers that have spawned the young generation of farmers who are really starting to come into their own right now.

01:11:27

BB: Yeah; I think there's been several, but Alex and Betsy are one great example, and Ken Dawson is another great example of two Market stalwarts who have nurtured and mentored young growers and given them the tools to be successful in a farm-to-market economy—or economic model, that is.

01:12:00

And there's several who are doing really exceptional stuff there, who both come out of those two schools of growing. What they have is—they've seen several seasons of the—the vagaries of weather here, how product responds out in the field to circumstances, what drought means to you, how the Market itself has an ebb and flow that's economic and seasonal.

01:12:39

While I was exalting about how marvelous the Market was yesterday, it's also one of the times when there's the fewest people in Chapel Hill and Carrboro. And so, you know, when they're at their wealthiest, they don't always have the full complement of audience that maybe that wealth deserves—and so, understanding that.

01:12:59

You know the goal is to go to the Market with a lot and return with nothing. And so if you have to take it back home and haul it back out again, then you're sort of losing some of that immediacy. If you try and have to go and resell it again on Wednesday, it's not exactly right. It

means understanding, you know, how much to plant, you know will you get the germination that you anticipate, to yield at the prime times? Do you really want to be growing tomatoes in late August in North Carolina when they're most susceptible to various diseases, because you're going to end up losing more than you'll harvest, and so is it really worth it?

01:13:47

These are the things that the Hitts and Ken and other growers have taught the younger ones who are coming along. And they've also seen, you know, what's successful from a sales perspective and what isn't. And so they don't waste their time growing the things that people don't buy or that are more perishable or can't be harvested Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for the Saturday Market, so—because you can't do everything.

01:14:14

When it's brutal like it can often be in late June and early July and mid-July, you need to get your harvesting done early and then have other projects around the farm to take care of after that is done with. So you know there's smart people there. The ones that are not smart haven't continued to do it. But there's some ones who have really sustained themselves, and several of them who have figured out mechanisms to maximize what they're able to achieve in that market environment. You know, the Soehners are a great example of that. You know, he says, "I grow really great arugula. It is something that I can do really well, and I'm really proud of it," and he has a right to be. His—John Soehner at Eco Farm—he doesn't have any now; it's too hot for arugula. But when he's got it, he's got some of the most beautiful arugula around.

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You know, there are people who are specialists. Kathy and Michael Perry from Periwinkle Farm are really the only people anymore who are growing a wide variety of potatoes, and what they do with that is really good. Potatoes, they don't have a lot of pizzazz, but the fact

that they can offer you seven or eight varieties of potatoes and they have, you know, distinctive characteristics as well as coloration and offer you the opportunity to employ them in different ways—and they grow in a bunch of different sizes. They harvest them in a bunch of different sizes so you can use them how you choose to use them. And it's great for the consumer as well as for the restaurateur to have that sort of resource, you know.

01:16:01

If you want to plant things in your yard, there's guys that—two or three people who, you know, grow gardening plants and those are a great resource, because those people can really tell you how they'll perform here. You know, they're not just selling it and it's not a big-box store that didn't raise it and they just put it out there for you to take away.

01:16:22

The tomato plants that we got this year from one of the plant growers have been jacking! **[*Laughs*]** So it's a good tomato year, it looks like. You know, I feel like, I think that that's really the legacy that a lot of those established growers will have to leave for people. There's people there who I'm astonished that they're still doing it. The Zacharys, I mean, he's in his late eighties, and she's probably eighty-two or something.

01:16:58

KB: At least, yeah.

01:16:58

BB: And the fact that they're doing this extremely hard work and showing up every week—sometimes twice a week when they decide to do Wednesday, but mostly just on Saturdays—is sort of a testimony that in some respects farming, like cooking, can keep you involved in your

life beyond the normal parameters. It's something you can keep doing. If you—I don't think they have to, but they do it because it keeps them alive. It gives him something to reward getting out of bed every day, so—.

01:17:33

KB: And the multi-generational farms too I find really interesting, 'cause there's several of them at the Market now and it'll be, I think, interesting to see how they progress, I mean the Brinkleys being one of them. McAdams is a family farm kind of thing. So when you've got—

01:17:47

BB: The Grahams.

01:17:48

KB: The Grahams, yeah; there's actually quite a number of them, so hopefully the tradition continues and gets passed along within the family. I think that would be really wonderful.

01:18:00

BB: I think the other aspect of it that I appreciate is that even with all the fava bean and white Hakurei turnip growing vegetable-of-the moment things—there's still some people who want to grow the old varieties, and that's really important to me as someone who wants to be able to—one, still cook with those ingredients that mean Piedmont, North Carolina, to me. But also to be able to put them on the plate in front of customers. You know, with diverse audience that we have at the restaurant, there's less and less people who may have been exposed to that. So to—you know, to be able to do stewed okra in a white tablecloth restaurant, to braise pole beans or

flat beans, to cook purple-hull peas and corn, to have, you know, creamed corn. The vegetables that were on that table that I talked about at the outset of this conversation that define the way I think about where I grew up and the food that I am built on is still available for me to get there. And that's what I—there was a period when it sort of tried to go away, and then fortunately there's other chefs and consumers like us who demanded that they come back.

01:19:38

And so I'm grateful to be able to have those ingredients. You can get wonderful turnip and mustard greens to cook in the way that they're supposed to be cooked. You can, you know, feel like you're translating—or, I guess, channeling—your grandmother when you're standing in front of that pot in a commercial kitchen. It's good.

01:20:08

KB: It's all good. **[*Laughs*]**

01:20:10

KM: These are great stories, y'all; thanks.

01:20:14

[End Barkers Interview]