

T-BOY BERZAS
T-Boy's Slaughterhouse – Mamou, LA

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Date: October 11, 2006
Location: T-Boy's Slaughterhouse – Mamou, LA
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 4 minutes
Project: Southern Boudin Trail - Louisiana

[Begin T-Boy Berzas]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Wednesday, October 11th 2006 and I am east of Mamou, Louisiana, at T-Boy's Slaughterhouse. And Mr. T-Boy, if you would please state your full name and your birth date for the record, please?

00:00:19

T-Boy Berzas: My full name is Paul Nathan Berzas, Jr. and I'm known as T-Boy. My date of birth is July 15, 1968.

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AE: And can you tell me the story behind your—your nickname T-Boy?

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TBB: Well we were a big family of nine children, and I happened to be the last one in the family born and they—and in French the word *tee* means little, so and I was littlest one running around, so they called me T-Boy. And that kind of stuck to—with it and I enjoy the name. Good Cajun name.

00:01:03

AE: And I was learning from the Sauciers earlier today that your father drove the school bus in Mamou, is that right? It was your father?

00:01:10

TBB: Yes, it was my father, and he drove a school bus. He was a Police Gerard, which is an office they hold for keeping up the maintenance on the roads and so forth. And also he was a farmer. To raise nine kids, that's something they had to do.

00:01:27

AE: What did he farm?

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TBB: He farmed rice, soybeans, and we had our own cattle and hogs, and we butchered to feed the whole family. And then we farmed as a family, and the kids would take care of the—the small, what you call that—with the onion tops, green onions, purple hull peas—anything they could sell to stores locally around here. Kind of like the old days, the children would—would work that, so that they can sell that to make their own money.

00:02:00

AE: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like growing up and—and growing up with the livestock and slaughtering your own meat and all that?

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TBB: Well when we grew up, I was the youngest one. It kind of figured out that it would—did our own slaughtering at home. As I was young and growing up, we started hiring slaughterhouses to take care of ours, but as I was very young and—and the rest of my brothers, they would take their own animals, and we'd kill it and the friends would come over and help and they would put those—give them each a share of meat to put up and we always had—had fresh meat. We never were short of meat.

00:02:42

AE: How far does your family go back in this area?

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TBB: Oh, Lord, I haven't—I'm not sure of the idea on that. We've been here for—well the land that my daddy and them own right now were homesteaded by his grandmother, so that—it's a good while. That's two, three, four—that's four generations, for sure, since the homestead was homesteaded.

00:03:14

AE: And I—when I was here visiting with your daughter Katie [Berzas Savoie] yesterday, and she's working here at your place, and your family all seems to still be around. And it seems to be a real part of Cajun culture to have your family be really tight-knit and everybody being—staying in one place.

00:03:30

TBB: I think it's—it's a bonus that you get to spend time with your family every day. Sometimes it's hard; sometimes it's easy. But you know, you always have somebody that cares about your—your business, your place, your money, and so forth; and it's good for the kids to learn how to work. One of the problems that we're all facing in business these days is to find someone that is not scared to work. And this way these kids were brought up to work just like I was when I was young—not scared of it. Now, there's a lot of them that are just scared of it. The word *to work* just scares them. So for us, it's a real big benefit and we enjoy it. Sometimes it's fun; sometimes it's not. But that's the way life is.

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AE: So when did you open the slaughterhouse here?

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TBB: I think it's about eleven-and-a-half years ago. I used to work for—started working with the local meat market not far from here. He trained me and was one of my cousins—a first and third cousin—and he trained me how to cut a little bit of the meat. And then I came to work for a guy that had a slaughterhouse down the road here. He closed the building down and bought this slaughterhouse, and then in the meantime his—his business went down a little bit, maybe not managed just right but he taught me a lot—lot of stuff. And he ended up closing it, and I went to work somewhere else for a couple years. And then I saw it closed for two or three years and I said, “I think I can do that.” So I went ahead and got into it. And I had learned a lot in the past, and I enjoyed it. So we opened it up, and we're doing very well now.

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AE: Did you start working right after [high] school, or did you go to college?

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TBB: No, we started working right afterwards. To be honest, I didn't graduate. We got married when we was young; Laurie and I and started working right away in the farms, with the other people making a little money and then—and then we—I did a lot of different things. I went in the oil field; I rough-necked in the oil field and went back to working with some farmers because I enjoyed it so much—farming. And then I started in the meat business and—. Well no, I had a

spell where I went through four years of managing—about three-and-a-half years of managing a furniture rent-to-own business, and it gave me some managerial experience.

00:05:47

AE: And when you started working in that first slaughterhouse, is it something that you wanted to do and wanted to learn, or was it just kind of like happenstance that you wanted—that you ended up working there?

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TBB: It was just a good opportunity. I always did like to learn about new things, and I always liked new tasks and enjoyed that, so it was something new for me. And I enjoyed it when I started, and I still enjoy it. But it wasn't something I just went out for; I kind of like took the job and—and enjoyed it once I learned it.

00:06:17

AE: And what do you enjoy about it?

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TBB: Well it's not a real bad job, you know. You get—you don't have to stand outside in the heat or freezing cold; most of the time you're inside. One of my favorite things is when I have time—because as the owner and the worker, you don't have time just to be with the customers all the time—but to visit with the customers when they come in, you know, give them a few minutes and—and—and satisfy the customers is what I enjoy.

00:06:43

AE: Can you talk about the culture of this area a little bit and how, you know, there's a lot of hunting and a lot of raising of livestock and—and the culture that is behind the demand for slaughterhouses here?

00:06:56

TBB: In the past we had several slaughterhouses in the parish [Evangeline Parish]. I am the last slaughterhouse left in this parish and neighboring don't have any at all, so it—it's kind of—was a fitting tradition of getting your meats—raising your own meat, killing them, and putting them in the freezer and feeding your families with all the big supermarkets and so forth. They come out and—. [*Laughs*] They come out and they—and they have all these meats and the younger people were not educated as far as where—where a piece of pork chop comes from. They think it comes from a box; they don't know it comes from a hog. So anyway, the young people are not as educated, so the slaughtering kind of slacked off in the past. And there's not as many slaughterhouses like they had in the past, but now there is still a demand for it because they still have people raising their own cattle and their own hogs and—and their tradition that they were raised with was to eat fresh meat that they kill themselves. They know that it—it does not have any kind of chemicals and stuff in the meat so it—it's still a tradition, and we still stay pretty busy with it.

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AE: Are there still some folks who are raising their own livestock that process it themselves?

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TBB: There's a few—not as many no more because it's just so much easier to have it done where—where you have a facility that makes sure your meat is guaranteed, as far as the cleanliness and so forth. There's still some that do, like when they go in the wild game, as far as for deer, they'll skin their own deer, gut their own deer, and skin it and some will cut it themselves—de-bone it or they bring it to us. We do a lot—lot of deer during deer season and a lot of deer sausage and just different things with deer we do.

00:08:49

AE: And when I was here yesterday, hanging out and getting a tour of the place, there was a man here, I believe, who—who delivered a hog, I think, that he was here with—with a hog that he was dropping off at your barn back there. [*Laughs*] Can you talk about where you get—where you get your animals and how that works?

00:09:08

TBB: Well like this guy right here was probably dropping off a hog that he raised himself. We're going to kill it, cut it, possibly wrap it, or he may wrap it himself. My animals I buy straight from feedlots. In other words, there's hogs and calves that—that people raise and they put them straight in feed-lots where they eat just feed, and it makes a better meat, so I buy directly from them in lots of, you know, 20, 30, 40 sometimes as I need them.

00:09:41

AE: So what might be your schedule of—of slaughtering hogs when you have—when you're processing meat?

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TBB: Well we have—our government controls a lot of our money flow, so the beginning of the month we have more money flow, so we kill more hogs and calves at the beginning of the month and as we need. We kill only as we need. We—we may get thirty of them and leave them in the pen and kill ten, fifteen the first week, you know, ten, fifteen the second week, and then a few the third week and so forth. The same thing with the calves. As we need, we kill. That way it's fresh. But we keep them handy in the pen under—under feed and we can kill them as we need.

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AE: Can you talk about kind of the price scale for what you pay for a hog and a calf? And then it might be too detailed to kind of break it down into sausage and all that but kind of the—the prices that go with those?

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TBB: If—if you're talking about once you buy a hog and de-bone it and to process into sausage, when you buy a hog, a lot of times you heard—you might hear of a price of a hog there at fifty-cents a pound where the—once you de-bone it and make sausage out of it, we have to sell it for \$2.69 a pound. Because once you kill it, you lose a percentage, and once you de-bone it, you lose another percentage, and then once you smoke it, you lose another percentage. So you might—you lose a lot of different percentages; you have to figure all that into it so you can come out and make a profit. I think that was the answer to your question.

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AE: No, it was—is there an average weight of the hogs and calves that you like to get?

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TBB: My—my calves, I like to get them about 750—750-pounds average. I find that they're just getting—just getting off of sucking on the mother which is a real good high protein milk and stuff and there have been in what we call a dry lot for 60 to 90 days, so that they can make the marbling into the meat in those—those 60 to 90 days and the same thing with the hogs—I like them about approximately 180—180-pounds to 200-pounds, where they're still young and tender. They don't have too much fat on them. That way we can—because around here the—the heritage—used to leave that skin on the outside and without a lot of fat but with the skin on it to give it some extra flavor.

00:12:06

AE: So would you be able to say if I—obviously, hypothetically—if I brought in my own hog [Laughs] and I wanted you to—to slaughter it for me and to make sausage and pork chops and everything out of it, is there kind of a flat rate that is assigned to that, if I were to bring in my own animal?

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TBB: Well we have a couple of different rates that we go off for that. What we'll do is we have a slaughter rate and we also have a—a cut-up rate, which may consist of either slicing it for you or de-boning it to make the sausage, and then we charge you a small fee for the stuffing and smoking the sausage.

00:12:46

AE: What are those rates?

00:12:46

TBB: Well the rates on the sausage is 79-cents a pound; that's to make it and smoke it. And— and depending on the—the size of the hog is the way we charge, it usually runs around—around twenty-five to thirty dollars to kill it. And the de-boning will run about the same price twenty-five to thirty dollars to de-bone it.

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AE: So do you have a lot of—of that or is it primarily you getting your own animals to process for your own sale?

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TBB: We do these as—as what we call custom slaughter. We slaughter animals for the customers; we take care of them from one way or another whether it is to cut, de-bone, or sausage and so forth. That's the normal thing that we do. And then we also do for ourselves every day. We just smoke just about every day for our own purposes for—for retail—the sausage and stuff and also for boudin. And then we also retail sliced beef and sliced pork—custom cut the way you want.

00:13:48

AE: Now have most slaughterhouses always had a retail element where they made their own sausage and boudin and all that?

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TBB: When I was growing up, yes, most of them have. When I was younger, almost everybody had their own slaughterhouse, and there were some kin and some friends that had their own types of slaughtering that they would do in the backyard. And they wouldn't retail it, but they would

take it and share it with their friends. And you'd use it as soon as you could because you didn't have air-condition back then.

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AE: So when you first started working in the—the first slaughterhouse meat market where you worked, did you also learn how to smoke sausage and make boudin and all that then?

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TBB: Yes. I had—I had some familiarity and, like I said, whenever I was younger, the—my parents and them had started using the slaughterhouse as I grew up. But I learned a lot with the first guy that I had worked for in the first slaughterhouse, and that's when I learned how to smoke, how the losses were, just in general just a lot about meat from the start to finish, from live until it was sold over the counter.

00:14:59

AE: And how about the boudin? Since that's really why I'm here, for this project. But everything else I definitely want to learn about. But how about like the recipe for boudin? Is that something that was your family's or that you developed on your own?

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TBB: Well that goes back to a couple of the friends that I had that I worked with—the first job I had and the second job in the meat, which was with the slaughterhouse. I learned a lot with them as—as far as what boudin is made out of and how it works as far as the—the quantity of—of rice and meat and onions and—and so forth—ratio. So whenever I ate boudin and I thought I wanted to change it, I knew exactly—I knew rough about—a rough figure about how boudin was made,

what it was made out of. And I wanted to change things to my taste, so I changed different things to my taste, and that's when I called it my recipe.

[Short pause]

00:15:55

AE: Okay, sure. **[Pause]** All right. We are back and we were talking about your boudin recipe. And so I wonder what, to you, what is your taste for boudin and what do you think makes a good boudin?

00:16:10

TBB: Well, of course, we have a lot of different parts to boudin that makes a large difference. One of the things that—that I always say that makes a big difference is fresh meat. When you get some meat that's been killed in Kansas City somewhere or—and—and get it shipped in—in a box and you're not sure how old it is and so forth, your boudin is not going to taste as good as some that's been killed and de-boned and cooked and put in boudin right away. It makes a large difference in the flavor of the boudin. Another thing that I find that's very important is the spices. We call it seasoning over here. The right salt, pepper, and the other spices makes a big difference. And, of course, I use the T-Boy's [brand] spices in there. And the right equation of onions and onion tops and parsley and—and your correct equation of the liver—the pork liver makes a good—big difference and just putting the right equation together really makes it good.

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AE: Can you talk a little bit more about the liver because Mr. [John] Saucier yesterday was saying that it's important to keep it moist. But some people, from what I learn, like to—like to

have a really liver-y and some people not? Is that a personal preference or is that something that you think is a little more specific for a good boudin?

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TBB: Well your—you have different types of Cajuns, I guess we'd call it. And some people prefer a boudin with not as much liver. You know, it goes back to some of these people around here may have stomach trouble or something and liver is a little hard on the—on the stomach troubles and so forth, so they may not—they may have a tendency to lean away from—from the boudin with liver. But the majority of the old Cajun boudin has the liver in it and a good bit of it. They used to even use what they called the whole set of organs as far as the liver, the spleen, the kidney, what—the heart—all that was put in it in the older days. But now boudin has come such a long ways and has become a—a large-scale—sales that we can't find enough organs for it. So the liver, we end up using the liver because there's way more liver per set of organs than—than—pound-wise than the other—other parts.

00:18:48

AE: And talking about the old ways, can—do you have an idea of—of the history of boudin? I mean obviously, then, it—it developed as a way maybe to use all of those organ meats and—and not put them to waste, but do you know how the food was developed actually?

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TBB: I—I listen to a guy on TV before, like I said, they started this before I was young—when I was young, they started way before me. I listened to a guy on TV that—and it made some sense that a lot of the—the blacks in the old days started a lot of these Cajun products—boudin,

andouille, smoked ham hocks—a lot of different odds and ends that may have been bony or—or something that they—the bigger guys, the whiter people—the white people that would hire these black people to help them, the white people would take the pretty meats and leave the—the scrappier meats, which the boudin has—the casing on the outside is actually a gut that we clean and the inside, the organs, the bigger wheels didn't want to mess with that. And so they used a lot of these things and that's—and I was taught that those people started a lot of this. And we kept it in our Cajun heritage and Creole heritage around here. So I think that's where it started from, is what I understand.

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AE: And now the casings, I know a lot of people who make sausage, they'll buy casings in bulk from places, but you're obviously using the casings that come out of the animals that you slaughter?

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TBB: To be honest they—they will not let us use our casing. You have to have a special processing plant that could clean those. We could clean them good—plenty good enough for us to eat, but according to the law and the government they have to have—be specially cleaned so we are ordering them. But it is a real casing still, but we are having to order them from a large plant that can process these—these guys in the proper way.

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AE: Well then if—if it were legal for you to use the—the casings that come out of the animals that you slaughter, would you have enough to produce the quantity of boudin that you make?

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TBB: I don't think I could keep up with the amount, no. We sell way more boudin than—than we can kill the amount of hogs.

00:21:13

AE: And so being, like you said, one of the last slaughterhouses in this parish and in the area, but now you've generated a reputation for good boudin and—and cracklin's and sausage and what not, what do you think about that?

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TBB: Well when I first started, we—my wife and I—we started with nothing when we opened the place and as far as—we have come a long ways in—in life and—and money-wise. We're way more—much more better off than we were when we first started. And being that there's no slaughterhouses around it helped us to—to hang in there and—and keep more business than normally, if they had five or six of them. So it helped us out a lot being the only one.

00:22:03

AE: But as far as—as, you know, producing food, instead of just being a slaughterhouse and actually making food that you're becoming known for, like your—your boudin, especially, since you're in *Louisiana Life* and all that, how does it feel to be recognized for—for your boudin?

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TBB: Well I feel it's a real big honor. And especially when we saw it in the *Louisiana Life Magazine* and—and being invited to do this with you, it—we have been growing and we even

opened a second store, and we're still growing very much, so I feel it's a very big honor that we have a good quality product and—and we're starting to spread out more with it, and I think we can grow a lot more.

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AE: And your second store is in Eunice, is that right?

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TBB: Yes, we're located in Eunice. We're—we were just starting it out. There's about approximately six months since we've opened, and we had a nice guy that was kind enough to rent us a spot in the corner of his truck stop, and he's giving us a big start and—and now we're looking for a place of our own as we speak and—which is good because we have grown—outgrown the little corner we have in there. And we decided once we get into our own place, we think we'll blossom very big.

00:23:25

AE: When I was talking to Katie yesterday, we were talking about that store and that people in Eunice are starting to get a taste for your products now. Is that kind of difficult to overcome what some people, who are used to eating boudin in Eunice and you coming in with boudin and you're only like eight miles away, but is there a—a taste kind of difference that you have to accommodate?

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TBB: Well being only, like you said, eight to ten miles away, I think it's helped me a lot to get it started over there because they already know my quality, and when they hear my name they

know it's a high-quality product. Some of have tasted it before, so when we did move to Eunice and—and started putting the boudin, we had a few customers ready—ready to buy with us and those customers—and they come in and we talk to them. We ask them—tell everybody else and spread the word because word of mouth is the best. You can buy radio advertisements, which we did—newspaper advertisements. But word of mouth, people that have tasted the quality, is what helped spread the word and—and that's what helps it to grow. But yes, changing—people that have been used to eating their boudin that—that is in Eunice and ours is a little bit different. It does take a little while to change them over but after the word of mouth has—has spoken, you know—one person to another and tells them it's good and they try it a couple times, they get hooked on it.

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AE: Can you explain how yours is a little different?

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TBB: I really don't know what they have in theirs, and I don't want to cut down any of the businesses. I know—I know that I keep the freshest and the best products in my boudin and—and I'm not talking about Eunice people, but I know there's a lot of stores in Louisiana that use boudin for disposal; they'll put their older meats and stuff, and it makes a difference in the quality of the taste. I mean and—and that's why we're selling more than a lot of people are right now.

00:25:24

AE: Can you describe your boudin? Like what it looks like and smells like and kind of the texture of the casing and all those things that people talk about when they talk about boudin?

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TBB: Well we have—. [*Interruption*]

[*Short pause*]

00:25:42

AE: Okay, we're back and I think T-Boy was about to describe his boudin.

00:25:47

TBB: In describing the boudin, as far as this—see, as far as what I believe it tastes and feels and looks like, I feel that my boudin has a good casing, as far as we cook it properly to where it—the casing does break, so that you can eat it and not have to just take the meat—the stuffing out of it. The smell is just—it gets to you; you can't do without it. That's why I eat so much of it. I keep smelling it all day long. And as far as the taste, I find it—I find it very good. We find that we have the right amount of rice, so that it's not too meaty and the rice is—the texture of the rice is not coarse so that it's—it's flaky like long-grain rice coming out of—falling off your plate or something and we have a good medium-grain rice that we use that absorbs the flavoring, the broth that we put in there, and not too mushy and not too hard and we put the right amount of liver, so you have that great liver taste to it. And it's not really a liver taste, but it adds the flavor to it. And we use the T-Boy's Season-All in it, which is just the right amount of salt, red pepper, and black pepper in it and a certain amount of onions that are put in there raw when we stuff it,

so that when you cook it, it's cooked in it very little and it still gives that—that onion spice flavor. And I like it a lot, and a lot of other people like it, so we're selling a lot of it.

00:27:37

AE: Do you eat some of your own boudin every day?

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TBB: Yes, just about every day and that's why I take medicine. [*Laughs*]

00:27:44

AE: Do some people eat your casing, or do they just push it out of the casing?

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TBB: The majority of the people eat—eat the casing. Sometimes when we—like on a Saturday when we sell—we cook so many pounds consecutively and it doesn't get a chance to stay in that rice pot that we have here that we set it in, sometimes it does not get a chance to sit for a few minutes and the casing doesn't break just right at times—right when it comes out of the pot it sits a few minutes, it breaks easier. So some will not eat the casing, but the majority of the people eat it.

00:28:21

AE: And yesterday, when Katie was serving the boudin, she cuts it with the scissors. How long have y'all been doing that, cutting links like that?

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TBB: Well we've been doing it since the day we opened. I learned that from the guy that used to own that slaughterhouse before me. And 90-percent of the people in—or 99-percent of the people in Louisiana use a knife, and this is so much easier, so much more sanitary; you don't cut your paper underneath and it gives a good clean cut across the boudin, and it's much easier and faster because we serve so many people, we have to keep a good pace up.

00:28:54

AE: How much boudin do you think you—you sell a day?

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TBB: Well here—just in Mamou we sell 150 to 175-pounds a day; in Eunice we—there's only six months we're opened and we're already selling 100 to 125-pounds a day. That is on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday; on Friday the Eunice doubles and Mamou doubles and on Saturday Eunice and Mamou at least triple and in the winter months sometimes quadruple—up to four times as much. In Mamou—in Eunice we haven't had a winter month yet, but it's coming; it's going to do the same.

00:29:31

AE: And are you selling all fresh boudin, or is some of it frozen that people take with them?

00:29:36

TBB: The majority of the boudin that we sell are fresh, as far as we make it fresh every morning, so we—we sell it fresh like that. Some will call in and request it, and we'll vacuum pack and freeze it for them, so the majority of it it's either fresh-cooked, fresh made raw, or sometimes we'll—what we do is we have we call it a microwaved boudin; we cook it, vacuum

pack it, and freeze it in two—two links per pack so that people can just grab it and go home with it and throw it in the microwave either frozen or defrosted, seven to eight minutes they're eating hot boudin.

00:30:12

AE: Do you ship your boudin at all?

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TBB: No, I do not ship any. We—we started shipping in the past and—but the expense of shipping is rising so much we just pretty much did away with it because we have—we stay pretty busy without that.

00:30:28

AE: And on Saturday I know you do boudin balls. Can you talk about that?

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TBB: Yeah, we started with the boudin balls, and it's been climbing slowly but surely. We didn't start—about a year ago with them and—and it's growing a little bit at a time and—and it's—it's a different taste. It has, you know, your crust on the outside from the batter and a fried—fried boudin is a little bit different than boiled boudin, and it's pretty good.

00:30:55

AE: And you sell—do I remember two for a dollar on Saturday, is that right?

00:31:00

TBB: Yeah, we have it fifty-nine cents each or two for a dollar on Saturdays only.

00:31:05

AE: How much is a link of boudin?

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TBB: Well most time the links are made a little bit—little bit different and that's why we go by the pound with it, and we sell it here in Mamou \$2.59 a pound, and it's \$2.69 a pound in Eunice—larger towns usually sell it for a little bit more, and we're having to transport it, so it's an added cost. We just make up the difference and compete with the rest of the people at \$2.69 a pound.

00:31:32

AE: Is there—you were talking about in winter you're selling a lot of boudin. Is there a time of day when you sell a lot more?

00:31:38

TBB: Not necessarily. It's—it's throughout the day. You know, you have a breakfast rush and a dinner rush and then—then sometimes a mid-afternoon snack rush. But in general, the bulk of the boudin is just sold throughout the day. And in the wintertime, the reason you sell a lot more in the wintertime is first of all because of the—the cooler weather, people—a lot more people can eat pork. In the summertime they don't eat as much pork, and they go out in the hot sun and it might give me a little heartburn. But in the wintertime we also have the holidays and you have out of town people coming in and they load up on either the raw boudin or the microwave boudin also to bring home, so it increases the sales of—of the boudin.

00:32:20

AE: Sell a lot of boudin for Mardi Gras, T-Boy's wife is saying. [*Laurie Berzas is sitting in on the interview.*] Can you tell me—tell me about Mardi Gras a little bit, the—the Cajun Mardis Gras here in Mamou that happens?

00:32:37

TBB: It's—it's a Mardi Gras like no other. I hadn't thought about it to describe the whole thing, but they—early in the morning around six-thirty or seven they all meet at one location and the guys that are interested in what they call running Mardis Gras on the run, they have to come in and register and they—some will be bringing their own horses to ride, some will register to ride on trailers that will be pulled by tractors, and they make this long route around the countryside and picking up articles for their gumbo at the end of their ride. And some of the articles may be rice, which I normally donate when they pass in front of my place here, and some articles may be live chickens. And that's one of the best parts because they—when they throw a live chicken, all the guys that have been riding horseback and on the trailers and drinking mostly alcohol have to catch this chicken and it's a good—a good sight to see. And so they catch these chickens and give them to the captains, the guys in charge of leading the—the run and—and also people donate sausages and stuff like that to go in the gumbo. And when they finish making the whole round, which consists of the whole day, they go back and they have a gumbo cooked for them. And one of the things that they do in Mamou is—is they have some booths set up, and as of right now I think it's still non-profit organizations only. And one of the non-profit organizations may be the school, the—the different clubs in the school have—the fire departments will have booths there also and—and they buy different articles, maybe a meat for hamburgers, Boston butts for

Boston butt sandwiches, and a lot of the booths buy my boudin to sell to their—their booths and there's a lot of out of town people—thousands of out of town people. They close the streets up, and they're drinking and waiting for the Mardis Gras to come back in so they eat this boudin and sandwiches and so forth, and that helps us to sell a lot. Plus, they come here throughout the week that they spend here and buy boudin, so we sell a lot for Mardi Gras.

00:34:54

AE: And Katie was telling me yesterday that y'all push the counter up to the front door so they won't bring their horses in and all that?

00:34:59

TBB: Yes, we have to—to control it because they were trying to come in the first year and we learned that—that we just kind of put the counter up front and keep everybody outside and we serve right behind the counter with four different—with four or five different ladies and four or five different boudin pots ready to serve with scales and we—we move from the Friday morning, we're—we're here a whole day, that Saturday we're here a half a day, the Monday a whole day and usually the—the Tuesday, which is the Mardis Gras day, we leave around 10:30 or 11:00, so there's two full days and two half-days. We usually move over 3,000-pounds of boudin right here in Mamou. We have not been open in Eunice yet for Mardi Gras yet.

00:35:46

AE: Are you selling anything but boudin on those days during the Mardis Gras?

00:35:50

TBB: We—we have our normal sales, but the boudin is overwhelming so we more or less concentrate on that and cracklin's. The cracklin's, we—we sell a lot of those, too.

00:36:00

AE: Tell me about your cracklin's because when Katie was walking me through yesterday, I went back there and saw the—the pork skins sitting in the cast iron pots, and she said that you do them in small batches and all that. Can you talk about that a little bit?

00:36:13

TBB: Yeah, one of the—the reasons that we do sell a lot of cracklin's is that a lot of the stores will make one big, big batch and they'll take their scraps and so forth throughout the couple of days, and then they'll put them in there and make one big batch and make it last a few more days. Well we take—we take and keep some of our fresh pork trimmings off of the hogs, and we have to order what we call bellies to keep up with the—with the amount of cracklin's that we sell. And we take these bellies, we cut them up, and we cook them in about fourteen black pots; and we make cook seven, eight, ten a day, so that whenever our customer comes in, they're always cooked fresh throughout the day—not only fresh for one day but fresh throughout the day. Maybe, you know, five to eight times a day that they're fresh. So we move a lot of cracklin's because of that.

00:37:06

AE: Is there something about letting them sit in the lard that is helpful in their taste or in their cooking, or is it just convenient to keep them ready like that?

00:37:15

TBB: It's more or less for convenience but it does—does help the popping—the popping of the skins—the little bubbles on it—which makes it more tender. So when we pre-cook them the day before, we—when we turn them off, we cook them about three-quarters of the way; we turn them off, and we put them in the cooler and let them sit in the pot in—in the grease and so forth. The next day we can take them out, we warm up the grease, and within ten minutes we have a fresh pot every time someone asks for some more cracklin's. It doesn't take long.

00:37:47

AE: And then I saw in the grocery cart up front that you sell the rendered lard from, I guess, all kinds of cooking procedures. Is it mostly from cooking the cracklin's?

00:37:57

TBB: Yeah, it all comes from cooking the cracklin's. We have the—the excess grease from the cooking of cracklin's, and we sell it normally pretty cheap during the regular season, and still we keep it \$1.89 a gallon during the Thanksgiving season because people love to fry turkeys with this grease. It gives a real good flavor to the turkeys. So we move a lot of hog lard also.

00:38:21

AE: A lot of heart trouble here in Mamou? [*Laughs*]

00:38:26

TBB: We—we're all on some cholesterol medicine and triglyceride medicines, but we enjoy life.

00:38:32

AE: Well let's talk about some of the other stuff you make. Because a gentleman just brought in a deer for you to cut the shoulder off of, and then there's some meatballs being made out there and pounce [*stuffed pig stomach*]*—am I saying that right?*

00:38:46

TBB: Yes. Back—we had talked about the wildlife a little bit earlier, and this guy just brought in a—a wild hog and a wild deer that he and his son went hunting. And this time of the year it's only a bow season, which is primitive hunting, and they use the bow and arrow to kill, which is much harder to kill because you have to be—the deer or the wild animal has to be within 20 yards from you and the wild animal always smells you or hears you or sees you before you can do something. So it's—it's a very prestigious thing to have—to be able to kill with a bow. And he brought it in. He—if you noticed they were skinned and gutted already. So he brought some in; they want me to cut some and make a little bit of sausage with some of it and—so we do the full line of processing. Some people like to do the skinning and gutting themselves; sometimes they just gut it and bring it to me, and I take care of it from there. The meatballs and stuff you saw we were making, it's—at this time and age a lot of people work—wives and husbands and so when we get home most of us are all in a hurry to—to cook and eat and we don't have time to cook early during the day because we're all working, so we try to prepare a lot of the meats and—and as far as meatballs, they're already seasoned. We have cut-up onions and so forth inside them, and they're really rounded off, so that whenever someone gets home just put the water boiling and throw them in the pot either the first few or just browning them in a gravy. Pounce, you saw the green pounce we made; it's made out of mostly the same material we have in the meatballs, the—the—but on the inside the stuffing is more or less the same thing we use in the meatballs, but the pounce itself is the pork stomach comes out of the inside of a hog and what

we do is we take that—the government does let us keep that, and we can clean them and process them—we scald them in some water and scrape them and—and we get them to where they're 100-percent clean, and then we stuff them with that and sew them up, and when someone goes home they cook them like a pot roast and it's very, very good.

00:40:59

AE: What do you sew them up with?

00:41:00

TBB: I'm sorry?

00:41:01

AE: What do you use to sew them closed?

00:40:59

TBB: We use a special string that we buy from the—the butcher supply company that's made for that. We also have what we call a green—that's the green pounce; we also have a smoked pounce. We'll take it and when we're making our sausage, actually use the sausage stuffing and put it into this same pounce that's cleaned without any stuffing in it, but we'll put the sausage stuffing in it. We'll put it into there and smoke it just like a sausage except it's a larger item, so it tastes different than a sausage.

00:41:40

AE: And so then the green pounce is just the uncooked pounce, is that right?

00:41:46

TBB: Unsmoked—unsmoked. And when we talk about a smokehouse in this area, we smoke with—with a 180-degree heat and we—but we don't cook completely. It's not fully cooked; all our smoking is done so that we can just—just give the smoke flavor and keep it at a safe heat temperature while we're doing this. In the olden days they used to smoke it to where it was fully cooked. And because of the fact that they had no refrigerators, so they would smoke it way harder until it was cured, so that they could keep that. And a lot of times they would put that in some big crock jars with some hog lard over—and the hog lard would keep the—any bugs or anything from getting to the meat. This day and age, we smoke it for flavoring and juiciness, so we don't smoke it quite as hard and we can enjoy the sausage a little bit more juicier now with the—with the refrigeration.

00:42:43

AE: Well when I was talking to Mr. [John] Saucier yesterday, and he does everything the old ways, you know, and even when you're talking about what you do now and—and not smoking it all the way and he—we were talking yesterday about his sausage and the woman that came to buy some said that she really liked that smoked flavor, and his is so highly smoked that a lot of people don't have that taste anymore. So—but he says he has young customers, too. Can you talk about the difference in what he does that you—that you are aware of and what you do?

00:43:15

TBB: To be honest with you, I'm not there when he's smoking, but being I know him and—and he's kin to my wife, we—I know that their sausage and—they might smoke theirs just a little bit more than mine, but it's not a whole lot of difference as far as the—the amount of smoking he

has. We use a little bit different wood; it gives us a little bit different flavor. But as far as the amount of smoke, it's not a whole lot of difference. We just—neither one of us fully cook them but his is a little bit smoked—a little bit stronger than mine.

00:43:50

AE: What kind of—what do you use to smoke?

00:43:55

TBB: I use—I use a mixture of pecan, white oak, and red oak in mine.

00:44:02

AE: Can you talk about what each one of those woods does when smoking?

00:44:06

TBB: Well the white oak and the red oak have a very similar flavor that it puts out, but they are just a little different and that's why I like to use them both in combination. And the pecan is one of the—one of your best flavoring smoke woods and—and it's getting harder to find, so I mix it in with my oak, which I like the smell of oak, too, and the flavor of it, so I mix them both together. So we have that sweet flavor from the pecan and the regular oak smoked flavor from the oak wood.

00:44:35

AE: The oak, being such a dense wood, does it keep heat longer? Is there kind of a reason like that that you would use it?

00:44:43

TBB: No, I don't find that it keeps the heat any longer. They're both—when we get them, we get them both green—the oak and the pecan—so that it smokes—you need a lot of smoke in the smokehouse, so it gives you a little bit different type of smoke than a dry-wood would. A dry-wood burns faster, and it doesn't give as much smoke.

00:45:06

AE: Can you describe your smoker area out there and how—if that was already here or how you manipulated it to suit your needs?

00:45:14

TBB: Yeah, we have—the smokehouse that was here has been here for a long time, and it works very, very well. We have a little heater in the wintertime in the inside that we use to—to warm up the blocks on the wall. Just like anything else, if you want to heat up to a certain temperature, it takes a little time in the wintertime, if the blocks are cold to get the facility to be at a higher temperature. But we have a facility where we put the firebox on the outside and make our wood fire on the outside and it sucks—we have a big fanning vent that sucks the—the smoke and the heat and blows it directly into the smokehouse, and with some recovering pipes in the bottom it sucks it right back into the fire again. We're using some of the same heat and some of the same smoke, so it's continuously smoking and—and giving the correct flavors inside the meats.

00:46:06

AE: And also back there you have your little barn—stable area. How many animals can you hold in there at one time?

00:46:13

TBB: We can put quite a few. Normally—let me see if I can guess this now. We could probably put right at about 125 head of hogs, if we were just putting just hogs or pigs in—in there that are regular sized hogs. Calves, we'd have to put less. Of course, they take more room. But normally we keep on stock—I keep about six or eight calves for myself and anywhere from thirty to forty—thirty to forty hogs for myself, and I still have room for custom animals, people that raise their own. They'll bring them in for me to kill them and process them.

00:46:58

AE: And how many employees do you have and what kind of responsibilities do they have? Or do they all share responsibilities?

00:47:06

TBB: We have probably around sixteen employees, which a lot of them are part-time. A lot of them are ladies and they—they like to work part-time so that's how we—we make them happy. *[Laughs]* And we—we share all the—the workforce—all the workforce shares all the duties over here. We all—even the owners—me and my wife—we might mop and sweep and we do the cutting of the meat sometimes, if the other workers are not doing it. We—we all share—even the ladies get into the meat day and cut the onions and cut the meat and—and with knives and—and mix it and stuff and season all the roasts and stuff and—so they pretty much—the job criteria is anything and everything.

00:48:03

AE: How about the killing itself? Do y'all share that or is that you or one person or two people?

00:48:07

TBB: No, I have an older guy that was here before I even bought the place, and he's still there, and he does it by himself. He does all my butchering by himself, and he's very good at it. And of course we have hoists and—and equipment to make it easier on him than in the old days; they had to lift on heavy animals and stuff, but now it's much easier. And he's very, very good at it.

00:48:32

AE: And when you say very good, can you explain what that means?

00:48:36

TBB: Well people that doesn't do the same thing over and over every day like he does find it a lot harder, let's say, to skin a calf. When people will grab it and they'll skin a little piece at a time where he'll grab it and he'll make a—a slip of the knife from the front of the calf all the way to back and make it a long skinning process; it goes much faster, and he's very good at it. I also have my son, which goes to school, and then the holidays when we pick up a lot of extra business. People are killing their own hogs to—to bring home and—and cook for the holidays. Well when my son is off for the holidays of school, he does a lot of the slaughtering and helps the guy out too, so he—he's learned a lot from the killing of animals all the way to making the sausage and so forth.

00:49:24

AE: And your son's name is Brent, is that right?

00:49:27

TBB: Yes, Brent Paul Berzas.

00:49:29

AE: And he's in high school. How old is he?

00:49:33

TBB: He is sixteen, and he's a junior.

00:49:35

AE: And I understand that he's just—he really loves this business and—and can do everything here?

00:49:42

TBB: We have—he's—I'm not afraid to put him anywhere in the business. The only place we have not put him yet is on the actual saw—the slicing saw. And because of the fact that I feel that the maturity—I could put him there. The law says not to, but I could. But I feel the maturity of a person needs to be at least 18 or older, so they can keep their concentration on the blade. But I wouldn't be afraid for him to be able to cut it. He's saw me cut so many calves and hogs, I believe it wouldn't take much for me to show him how to cut whatsoever. He knows how—how to do it all watching me. When he first—when we first bought the place he would help me de-bone meat. He was—he was small. The table would reach him at his nose, and I'd give him my pocketknife to de-bone the meat because I didn't want to give him one of the big knives. And—and now he stands way taller—he's taller than me and can do anything in here.

00:50:40

AE: And Laurie was just saying that he runs the Eunice store for them on Saturdays. But is—is him—is his interest is it something that you kind of groomed him to appreciate or is it something that he really just took to on his own?

00:50:55

TBB: I asked him a question on day, I said you know—I said, “You’re pretty good at following directions.” I said, “Every time I ask you some things I know you don’t like to do, you just go and do it.” And I said, you know, “Why you’re not like some of the others—want to gripe or—?” And he said well you know—he said, “It’s got to be done.” And he said, “And I’m going to have to do it so,” he said, “I might as well just put my head down and do it.” So he—he’s learned to appreciate, not only working here with us, but he’s learned to appreciate work in itself—that if you look at work at a bad way, you’re not going to be happy; but if you look at it a good way, you’ll be happy because you’re probably going to have to work anyway.

00:51:33

AE: So do you look to him to carry on the business when you decide that maybe you want to retire?

00:51:38

TBB: Well I’d be happy for him to—to own his own business. And I’m not going to ask him to take this one. He’s telling me he’d like it and—and we will fix him up, you know, if he’d like to take it over and—and I’d be proud to give it to him. And I want him to make his own decision on that.

00:51:59

AE: And how about your daughter, Katie, working here?

00:52:02

TBB: She likes working here, too. She—she grew into it just like we all did, and she's starting to enjoy it now, you know. But she's in college, and she's doing well over there. And she works part-time here, so it keeps them—keeps her going between the studying and—and the work and—but she's learned to enjoy it.

00:52:22

AE: Well tell me now about your T-Boy's Seasoning mixture and how that came about.

00:52:28

TBB: Well that came about whenever we was making the boudin recipes and also when we learned to season and prepare meats when we first opened. We wanted to, like I said, have our own flavoring, and once we had our own flavoring, people would come in and buy the meats—buy the boudin, the cracklin's and so forth. But they always had a question: What—what do you season it with? And I'd say, "Well it's my own little mixture." And they kept saying, "Well you need to fix some for us to take home; we need some at home." So I started fixing a certain kinds and then we went to a new kind—the two different kinds that we mostly use. And then they started saying, "Well I'd like to have some without black pepper." So we started off with the white pepper seasoning, and so now we have five different blends of seasoning try to suit everybody's flavor—mine and everybody else's. So—and it's growing. And we ran a couple of wholesales and doing very well with it.

00:53:24

AE: Was that an easy thing to kind of get—produced and manufactured and get your label on it?

00:53:30

TBB: Well we had to—we wanted to get Cajun Certified, first of all, so we had to go through the government and get Cajun Certified. And then we had to get together with all the label companies and have some labels made. And when you're first starting in business it—every time you have one label plate made it's several hundred dollars, so it was kind of hard on us when we first started because we was having to start off with hardly nothing, as far as money-wise, but we made it through it all and—and—and getting the—the labels and the containers together is getting easier now, and it's going pretty good.

00:54:08

AE: How does it feel having your face on all those canisters out there? *[Laughs]*

00:54:10

TBB: Well they always tell me, if I'd put my wife's face, we'd sell double the seasoning. That's all I can say about that.

00:54:18

AE: What does it take to get Cajun Certified? Can you talk about that?

00:54:22

TBB: Really it's—it's just basically filling out forms and giving the—the information they need on the products, where they're coming from and so forth to—to guarantee that it is Cajun Certified, the seasoning and stuff and the spices and waiting on government to come back and

answer it and then send you the—the Cajun Certified emblem which is a certain one you have to have a certain type of the emblem to—to be able to repeat or remain on your labels.

00:54:53

AE: What does that mean to you to be Cajun Certified?

00:54:55

TBB: Well it means that you go to the other states and you see these—these places that say “A Cajun Restaurant.” You might think that it’s Cajun food in there and it’s—it’s not Cajun food; it’s some Cajun-named food. [*Phone Rings*] But it’s—it’s somebody else that’s not a Cajun cooking this. And whenever you see Cajun Certified and that—that Cajun Certified emblem, then you’ll know that it is a Cajun, and it’s the only way you can get these certifications.

00:55:27

AE: So what does it mean to you personally having, you know—being the fourth or fifth generation in this area to produce a product that’s Cajun Certified?

00:55:35

TBB: Oh, I’m very proud to be able to do that. We—we, a lot of times and our family and our tradition is—is with—means a lot to us and—and keeping the different traditions, which is Cajun traditions, going is—is—is an honor. Just like I have a brother that is a—has a Cajun—the name of his band is the Cajun Tradition Band, and they keep Cajun tradition music going. All his music he made, he always made it traditionally Cajun, and he’s the same way. He likes to keep the Cajun tradition going.

00:56:11

AE: Do you think that this area with the Cajun Mardis Gras and the traditions that are—that are still intact in this rural area, do you think those will stick around for a long time?

00:56:23

TBB: Oh, yes, it will stick around for a long time. And because, like anything else, some things start to fade out, and when things start to fade down a little bit, everybody started looking it and saying, “We can't have this!” So everybody is promoting Cajun products, promoting Cajun music and all the different things that Cajuns do, so it's growing more now than ever.

00:56:47

AE: From a—from a tourist—do you need to go do something? Okay, I can pause this again for a minute. *[Short pause]* All right, we're back after you cut those turkey necks, and I honestly forget what we were talking about before. But [Laurie and I] had been talking about the Mardis Gras again and the giving of the rice and that they dance for the rice when they come and get it?

00:57:07

TBB: Yes, whenever they stop for any article for the gumbo whether it's the rice, the sausage, or the chickens that they go to chase for one of the things that they do is they play a Cajun song or a Mardis Gras song or some of both and they ask to—to do a—a dance, which is you dance for the—the product that you're going to get. So sometimes it's men dancing by themselves, sometimes they go dance with the—the people from the home that they're stopped at or—or the place and they just make a good show and enjoy it.

00:57:43

AE: And your—your brother now has a band Cajun Tradition. They were nominated for a Grammy, I understand.

00:57:49

TBB: Yes, they were nominated—nominated for a Grammy Award. I'm not sure which year it was—a while back. And they've been—he's been playing music since he was about 12. I think he was on the Mardis Gras run, playing the Mardis Gras music at 12 years old.

00:58:04

AE: Was there a lot of music in your family growing up?

00:58:08

TBB: Well being that he was the oldest and I was the youngest, we had the French music all the time, and my daddy was the one that taught him. My daddy knew—you know, they always did listen to the Cajun French music and—but he took his time and when my—my brother decided that he was interested in learning the accordion, my daddy went and bought an accordion, learned how to play some songs from somebody else, so he could teach his son, my brother, how to play the accordion.

00:58:37

AE: Do you play an instrument at all?

00:58:38

TBB: I can play about three or four songs. I've learned that any person can do anything they want, so I said, "I want to learn it." So I sat down; my daddy taught me the three songs. And I

realized that I can learn anything and I can do anything like most people, but it doesn't mean that you're gifted for it. I figured there's a lot more work for me to learn them three songs. I'm happy I did it, and I don't need to do it no more.

00:59:01

AE: You learned three songs on the accordion?

00:59:02

TBB: Yes. Yes.

00:59:05

AE: So back to your business here—and we can wind this up because I know you're a businessman and I've kept you a long time, but what do you like best about what you do?

00:59:15

TBB: Well, you know, they always say when you own your own business you can do what you want. You can do what you want when your business lets you; some people can own businesses and—and never be there and—and make it and a lot of them cannot. What we do is we make sure the work is complete, and then one of the benefits that you have is that you can leave and enjoy some of your life with your family. But like during the holiday season, where a lot of times the people are off to spend time with their family, and we have to work even extra hard because that's the time that those guys are coming in from out of town and giving us more business. So while it's there, we have to get it, and whenever it slacks off a little bit, then we can—then we can take the benefit of having a little bit of time off. And that's one of the things I like the most about it, that once we get caught up with the work, that I can take time off and do work around

the house and go hunting and spend time with the family and do things to enjoy them, and I enjoy that.

01:00:17

AE: You get to do a lot of hunting yourself?

01:00:20

TBB: What's bad about the hunting part—it comes in whenever we're busy. That's what makes us busy, the deer season, so I do try to target the hunting at the very beginning before it gets too crazy and—and get as many—as many hunts as I can in before. But I do enjoy hunting, yes.

01:00:37

AE: Is there much of a—a kind of trade culture here, where people come in and trade meat for sausage or services for food or anything?

01:00:47

TBB: Well not here, no—not now. In the olden days they would, you know, trade in eggs for sugar or something they couldn't grow and—and so forth and so on. The hogs, they would raise some little pigs and trade that in at the butcher shop. Now days you don't see any of that anymore.

01:01:06

AE: Are you a cook—a big cook at home at all?

01:01:09

TBB: Oh, I love to cook. I—I do the—probably the majority of the cooking. I just enjoy stirring the pot and cooking.

01:01:16

AE: What do you like to cook?

01:01:18

TBB: Almost anything that is in a pot—above the pot—above the stove. I'm not really good in the oven. I really don't care for—lot of people bake roasts in the oven and so forth, and I love to cook and stir it in a pot and drink a few beers and enjoy my time with friends and family.

01:01:37

AE: And with the Mardis Gras that comes through here and all the people that you say come to town for that—just the town multiplies by the thousands—do you get—or have you maybe more recently with being in *Louisiana Life* and stuff like that—get many tourists through here who maybe have not had boudin or cracklin's or anything like that?

01:01:52

TBB: Especially around Mardis Gras and the other holidays we have a lot of tourists, especially during Mardi Gras. They come in and they don't know what boudin is, and so we just tell them it's similar to a dirty rice that they have eaten in the past. But if you tell them it's inside of a gut casing they're—they're not going to taste it. But this way you get them to taste it, and they don't realize what it is, and they enjoy it.

01:02:19

AE: Well is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to add or talk about?

01:02:24

TBB: Hmm, I'm going to have to think about that one for a second. I don't know of anything. I think you've covered almost everything. We're—I'd like to add that I appreciate you taking the time to come to this because you said it's a non-profit organization you're doing it for and—and thank the magazines for putting me in there, *The Louisiana Life*, and—and anybody that's supported me in the past—and thank everyone.

01:02:59

AE: Well on that—on that note, just to end up, since you know I am here documenting a traditional foodway, specifically boudin but also documenting your—your way of life here basically, do you feel like what you're doing as a businessman day-to-day is part of a traditional culture that should be maintained?

01:03:17

TBB: I feel—I feel I am taking a part because a lot of things we do here in—in this area we donate things to different organizations around here—fire departments, there's five or six different organizations and schools we donate to throughout the—throughout the year and we help Hospice also. It's a lot of different organizations that are non-profit that God has blessed us with a good business and—and so we, in turn, give back to our community as much as we possibly can.

01:03:54

AE: Well I very much appreciate you giving to me today, so thank you.

01:03:58

TBB: Thank you.

01:04:00

[End T-Boy Berzas]