KEVIN DOWNS
The Sausage Link—Sulphur, LA

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Date: September 10, 2007
Location: Napoleon Street—Sulphur, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Length: 1 hour, 2 minutes
Project: Southern Boudin Trail

[Begin Kevin Downs-Boudin Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, September 10, 2007. I'm in Sulphur, Louisiana with Mr. Kevin Downs. And if I could get you to say your name and your birth date and the name of your shop, please?

00:00:17

Kevin Downs: Kevin Downs, August 16, 1967. And the name of the shop is The Sausage Link.

00:00:24

SR: Thank you. And can you, just to start, out tell me a little bit about the shop: how long you've been open, and what you sell here?

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KD: Well today is our anniversary. We opened up September 10th six years ago. We specialize in fresh cut meats, sausage, boudin, and we have a full-service deli also.

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SR: And what do you mean by full-service deli? What kinds of stuff does that include?

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KD: We have daily plate lunches, or you can get hamburgers or rib-eye steaks, or grilled or fried shrimp, boudin balls—whatever you want made to order.

00:01:03

SR: In this part of the state, are there certain kinds of plate lunches that people expect on certain days?

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KD: Well, for us Mondays is beef tips. Tuesdays, fried pork chops or stuffed chicken breast. Wednesday is always stuffed pork roast with rice and gravy, candied yams, and lima beans. Thursdays we have hamburger steak, and Fridays is always some sort of seafood special.

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SR: Sounds good. And what did you do before you opened this shop? Were you in the meat business?

00:01:40

KD: Years ago, I was in the meat business at a little place called Misse's Grocery. I've always wanted to open up a shop like this, and it took me—took me I guess about 15 years to be able to actually get it done. We wrote our business plan for this place in 1990, and we didn't bring it to the bank until 2001.

00:02:08

SR: And so what did you do at Misse's?

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KD: I was his market manager, meat market manager.

00:02:14

SR: Okay. And so is that what you were doing pretty much for those 10 years that you had the business plan?

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KD: No, I actually went to work out at the refineries, and I was a lab tech. So pretty far difference between the two.

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SR: Yeah. And what do you think about your decision to enter this market?

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KD: Oh, it's awesome. I don't have to worry about working shift work anymore, and I have plenty of time to spend with the family, and if—if we have a ball game or a dance competition or whatnot, I don't have to worry about if I have to work that day or not. I can always take off, and we got a good bunch of people that work here for us, and it allows us to get away.

00:02:58

SR: That seems important. How many employees do you have here?

00:03:04

KD: About 30.

00:03:07

SR: And what was it, besides you know being your own boss, that—what do you enjoy about working with this kind of product? What is it about boudin and sausage and meat that—that moved you?

00:03:22

KD: Well we're from Louisiana. Do you even have to ask that question? That's—that's the main, the main part of our genre here is to always have food on the table and—but good food. Not too spicy, and not too mild, but just good food.

00:03:38

SR: And did you grow up in a family where that—where food was important?

00:03:42

KD: Food was the number one issue everyday. We—we grew up, we worked, we were not a rich family. As a matter of fact, we were pretty poor. And but the one thing that my mother always said was that we would never go hungry because no matter what else, we—she would always have a good meal everyday.

00:04:05

SR: And how many kids were there in your family?

00:04:08

KD: Three: a brother and a sister.

00:04:10

SR: And your mom was the primary cook?

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KD: Mom primary cook except on Saturdays when dad barbequed.

00:04:18

SR: And what sorts of—what are a couple of your memories of your favorite sorts of things that she would make?

00:04:25

KD: I would think probably deer roast and gravy with butter beans and sausage on the side.

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SR: Wow. That sounds—and would somebody in your family kill that deer, or would you buy the deer somewhere?

00:04:43

KD: No, we don't buy deer in Louisiana. We kill the deer in Louisiana.

00:04:46

SR: So you came from a hunting family too?

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KD: Yes, yes, very much so. And that—that was probably where I started with the sausage, was that we always would have our sausage from—from when we would process our deer. And then we started doing it at home. And—and then when I got into the meat market at Misse's I really went pretty far from there as far as starting out as the cleanup person there and going all the way through the process, learning everything about meat, and then from that point knowing that one day we would open our own shop.

00:05:26

SR: Now I'm getting a little off-track here, but I'm curious. So as far as I understand, you can actually make deer sausage in Louisiana in a place like this and then sell it. Is that true?

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KD: No, that's not true. You can actually buy a deer that's grown on a farm, processed and brought in, but because we process deer here I don't want to get the two intermixed. I only want to do the wild side.

00:05:58

SR: Okay. And so can you tell me what that means, that you process deer here?

00:06:01

KD: We take deer in, and we will cut them up or make sausage out of it—deer jerky, just whatever the person wants. We'll—we'll make it happen.

00:06:14

SR: So somebody goes out—somebody goes hunting and kills a deer and then brings it into you to take care of?

00:06:21

KD: Right. It has to be cleaned before it's brought to us, cleaned and then iced, yes. And then we'll take it from there and go through a process of asking the person what all they want us to do with the deer to process it. And about 85-percent of the time, it amounts to making sausage out of it.

00:06:41

SR: And how does the kind of deer sausage you make compare to, you know, to pork sausage? Do you make, like, a fresh deer sausage or a smoked hard sausage?

00:06:52

KD: We do—we do pan sausage for breakfast, or fresh rope sausage for gravies, and also smoked sausage. The majority of the sausage, again probably 90-percent, is smoked sausage.

00:07:08

SR: But if you went out and shot a deer, you couldn't then make sausage and sell it in the shop, right?

00:07:15

KD: Right. That's wild game.

00:07:20

SR: Okay. What other sorts of things did your family hunt?

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KD: Oh gosh, we're from Louisiana—ducks, geese, squirrels, rabbits, and deer. That's the main ones there.

00:07:32

SR: Okay. Well I'll ask you a little bit about that some more later. But let's get to the boudin. So, can you tell me about how you developed **[*Phone Rings*]**, without letting out any secrets, but just how you came to a recipe for this shop?

00:07:51

KD: Well we kicked it around a little bit and tried to decide what all would go in the boudin, and I will tell you that we decided that we would not put liver in the boudin. People who like boudin with liver will still eat the one without the liver, and then the people who don't like liver will—they're, they definitely concentrate on coming here. We actually, the day before we opened—we opened on September 10th and on September 9th we created the recipe for the boudin here at The Sausage Link.

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SR: And when you say *we*, who is we?

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KD: *We* would be my family: my—my wife, myself, my father-in-law, mother-in-law, mother and father.

00:08:43

SR: And was that difficult, to get everybody to agree on one particular style?

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KD: No. As a matter of fact, when we made the first batch we decided that it needed to be just a little—little bit more salt. And we added that to it, and we all tasted it again and all agreed immediately.

00:09:04

SR: So had you made boudin before? Did you have something to go on?

00:09:09

KD: I had. I had made boudin previously at Misse's Grocery. But just like in any business, you have trade secrets, so we—you know, I didn't know what his recipes were. And—and as a matter of fact, his boudin consisted of having liver—very little liver. And he would actually cook his onions, where my onions are not cooked until the final process.

00:09:45

SR: Is his store still open?

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KD: Yes, it is. And we're still very good friends. As a matter of fact he doesn't make boudin anymore. I have all of his equipment.

00:09:58

SR: Oh, well can you tell me what you think—just describe your boudin for me and what you think it's, you know, most outstanding characteristics are.

00:10:10

KD: Well it has a very nice taste to it. We use the best hog casings available. They're—they're hog casings, and they're about twice as expensive as a normal casing. But the casings are real thin and very edible, and the rice to meat ratio is—is very consistent. It's always—our boudin is

always the same. It's very consistent. The seasoning is made by myself, and it's made one batch at a time. And we—very good reports from the public. Everyone seems to enjoy it.

00:10:55

SR: And when you go for the rice to meat ratio, do you—which one do you want more of?

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KD: Well actually, you want a little more rice than meat. So you would—I would basically say you probably have about a 60/40 mix.

00:11:13

SR: And your casings, I noticed when I was eating it they're very—they snap. They're not rubbery. Is that because of the quality of the casing, or because of your technique in cooking?

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KD: That is definitely the quality of the casing. You have to start with a good casing to have a good boudin.

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SR: And what grain rice do you use?

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KD: It's long-grain. It's a 96/4, meaning 96 of the kernels have not been broken. Only four—only four-percent. And it's graded, good quality control on it.

00:11:45

SR: And do you think that it's because of the length of the rice, or how you cook it, that it's very—that it gives good texture? It's not mushy.

00:11:54

KD: Probably both, probably both. You—anyone can cook a mushy rice, and then you still have a mushy product. But if you get your technique down and—'cause you don't want your rice too hard or too mushy, so you got to get your cooking technique down. And once you have that, then I would actually—I would definitely say that long-grain is the way to go in boudin.

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SR: And do you cook—do you steam it like most people, like in a rice cooker?

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KD: It's done in rice cookers. We have six rice cookers in the back, capable of cooking 55-cups at a time. And on—when we cook boudin we definitely have all six going several times.

00:12:43

SR: Wow. That's a lot of rice. What, you know—can you characterize the boudin in this area in general, as opposed to say boudin recipes closer to Lafayette?

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KD: Ours are good; theirs are not.

00:13:01

SR: In what way?

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KD: I really, I feel like the further toward Lafayette you get, I think that you—the amount of liver is a lot more than what we would put in this area, which to me gives the boudin more of a—more of a bitter taste. And they also down that way—the ones that I've eaten is more of a medium-grain rice, so it tends to be a little mushier. Right. And they, like if you go down East—I won't name any names—but if you go down East you'll have sometimes maybe a 20 or 25-percent meat, you know, and 75-percent rice. So it gets—some of them get a little too ricey. But I have also seen it go the other way, where you can't hardly see very much rice in the boudin when you're—when you're eating off of it.

00:14:01

SR: And then that really affects the texture too.

00:14:04

KD: Exactly.

00:14:06

SR: What about growing up: was boudin a part of your diet growing up?

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KD: Definitely. We—we've been eating boudin ever since I can remember walking. It—I don't know if it was as common when I was growing up. You only had just several places to—maybe two or three places in this area. So boudin was probably maybe a once a week or—as a matter of fact boudin, well boudin was kind of like fast food to us when we were growing up because if you—. Now you have McDonald's and Wendy's or Burger King or whatever, but then you would stop through the little shop, pick up a pound or two of boudin. Mom didn't have to cook. Everything was ready.

00:14:51

SR: And so you would pick it up hot and just—would you eat it with anything, or just by itself?

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KD: Oh just by itself. But it—it's great on a sandwich too.

00:15:01

SR: And would you eat the casing?

00:15:04

KD: Well sure. Nothing wrong with hog casing.

00:15:09

SR: There's someone else in the room who is shaking her head. **[*Laughs*]** What is your name?

00:15:19

KD: Shelley. **[*Kevin answers question*.]**

00:15:19

SR: Shelley.

00:15:23

KD: My beautiful wife of 17 years.

00:15:25

SR: Oh okay, great. Nice to meet you. **[*Laughs*]** And are you from this area, from Sulphur?

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KD: Yes. Born and raised—Sulphur.

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SR: Can you tell me a little bit about the town, how it—is it considered a suburb of Lake Charles?

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KD: No. It's its own—it's its own city. Well let's go a little further. I'll- go back to part of my heritage. My last name is Downs. My—my father's father was a Downs, but his mother was a LeBleu and Arsene LeBleu, who was first mate to Jean Lafitte, the very famous pirateer in this area. He was first mate to Jean Lafitte, and he settled LeBleu Settlement, which is an outskirt of Lake Charles. So anyway, a very big thing in this area would be contraband days, all after Jean Lafitte and all. So yeah, I feel like my family has a very big part of the heritage in this area.

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SR: Wow. So that kind of took me off-guard. So how many generations back is that?

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KD: Do you remember, honey? I think it's five generations. Do you have that—?

00:16:41

Shelley Downs: Nine.

00:16:41

KD: Nine generations. She did our heritage a while back and it's, yeah.

00:16:48

SR: So LeBleu. L-e—how do you spell that?

00:16:55

KD: L-e-b-l-e-u.

00:16:57

SR: Okay. And so that person was from France?

00:17:02

KD: Yes.

00:17:05

SR: Okay. And—and came here as privateers, Shelley said. Well that's a pretty exciting family history.

00:17:14

KD: Yeah. I called them pirateers. Yeah, a privateer—yeah, yeah big difference.

00:17:22

SR: What about your mom's side?

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KD: Mom's side goes all the way back to—my grandmother was Amy Hanks. And I don't remember how many generations back it goes, but Abraham Lincoln's grandmother and my great-great-great—I don't know how many greats up—grandmother were sisters.

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SR: Wow. So what do you identify as?

00:17:56

KD: Was that Mary Hanks? Is it Mary—Mary Hanks, yes.

00:18:03

SR: Wow. So are you—do you call yourselves anything like Creole or Cajun?

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KD: No, we're Cajun. We're Cajun. Creole is down East. Creole is the food that when you take a bite of it, it burns your taste buds out 'cause it's so hot you can't eat it. That's Creole. Cajun—

00:18:21

SD: Lot more tomato-based. Creole is a lot more tomato-based—.

00:18:24

KD: Yeah, and very hot, very spicy.

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SD: More seasoned but—but it's more of, it's not only the seasoning so much as that it's a lot more sauces. It's more sort of French, where real French food has a lot of sauces and a lot of, you know, things—. It's more, just different food. Creole food—.

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SR: No, they're not the same, but some—well I don't know. Someone yesterday from around here told me he was Creole, so that's why I asked. But generally it's Cajun. Your family is Cajun.

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KD: That is correct. The family is very Cajun.

00:19:02

SR: And Shelley's too?

00:19:01

KD: My mother's maiden name was Lognion.

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SR: How do you spell that?

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KD: L-o-g-n-i-o-n.

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SR: Oh, and did your parents or grandparents speak any kind of French dialect?

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KD: My mother still speaks French. I have an uncle that works for me here, and that's how they stay so fluent on French right now, is that they—they speak almost everyday.

00:19:32

SD: The French dialect is not as prevalent as it used to be because even like in his grandmother's generation, they were—they were not allowed to go to public school and speak French.

00:19:44

SR: Right.

00:19:46

SD: So you know, they were forced to learn English. And then—but there are still quite a few people—. You know, my great-grandparents, and his also, I don't think either—any of them spoke English.

00:19:56

KD: Right. My—my grandmother couldn't speak English until she was 15.

00:20:03

SR: Wow. If someone comes into the shop and starts speaking French to you, can you understand it?

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KD: That would be a negative.

00:20:09

SR: **[*Laughs*]**

00:20:11

KD: My mother tried and tried to get me to take French classes and—but as my wife will say, and as the generations came on and—and well, as time went on the French speaking was actually kind of looked down upon. And so—so they kind of got out of that, so we didn't actually pick up on it.

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SR: What about your kids? I'm not sure how old they are, but did they have French in school at all?

00:20:44

KD: They have French and Spanish. And—but it's not the same as the Cajun French.

00:20:51

SR: How old are your kids?

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KD: They are 10, 12, and 14.

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SR: Wow. And do they spend any time here at the shop?

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KD: Yes, they do. And my two oldest are girls, and they really don't have much of an ambition towards The Sausage Link, which is okay by me. But my little boy, he is already saying that he's taking over. And he will actually go in and bark a few orders every now and then, and he'll grab some of the plastic gloves and start rolling boudin balls in the afternoon sometimes.

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SR: And how does that make you feel?

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KD: Oh it makes me feel good. It makes me feel good. It makes me feel like, like maybe I've, you know come a long way and really accomplished something.

00:21:36

SR: When you, you know, come to work—or I guess even when you opened up the shop—was it in your consciousness that you were helping preserve a very deep culture?

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KD: Yes, because I think that, as a matter of fact, years ago they were telling us market guys that all of the meats from the—in the future would be pre-cut and brought in like, just like now at Wal-Mart. If you go to Wal-Mart, everything is brought in pre-cut. There's no butchers at Wal-Mart anymore. They're talking about doing it in some of the other chain stores, and that's okay by me because I think that people still want fresh cut meat. They still want to go to a butcher and say, you know, *Can I have this cut a certain way?* And—and they want somebody to talk to if they have a problem of not knowing what sort of meat or cut of meat they want. You have—you have guys on hand all times that can actually answer those questions.

00:22:41

SR: Uh-hm. Do you have certain, maybe unusual, things for regular customers that you do, or that you order?

00:22:53

KD: Well we actually bone out chickens here. We have boneless chickens, and we stuff them with boudin and sausage. We make stuffed pork chops. We make—and stuffed chicken breast, and we do stuffed pork roast with all the things like Grandma used to make for us with the onions, garlic, green onions, and our special seasonings. We make all our own seasonings here at

The Sausage Link, so you can come and get our all-spice or sausage seasoning. You know we'll even—you tell us how much meat you have, and you want to make your own sausage, and we'll actually sell you the seasoning to make your own sausage. And—and we make all, you know all our boudin and sausages and tasso—just a number of things.

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SR: What kind of different sausages do you make?

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KD: We make an all-beef, an all-pork, a pork with green onion, a pork with jalapeno and garlic, and a beef and pork mixed. And if you want something different than that, we have guys that come in sometimes with their deer and ask us to make some with habañero peppers, and so whatever you want. If you can dream it up, since we make our own seasonings and we don't have to go by a guideline recipe, we can do anything you want.

00:24:18

SR: And you're open to that?

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KD: Sure, sure. Everyone has their own little thing that they like and—and taste about something, so whatever you need we'll do.

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SR: And so of those sausages that you mentioned, are any of them smoked?

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KD: Yes, all of those sausages are smoked. And—but you can also get them, and it's the fresh rope sausage—or down here we call it "green sausage." You can have it that way, or if you just want it ground a little finer into pan sausage, or—or even the coarse ground, which a lot of people like that too. Whatever you want, it's—we'll do it.

00:24:55

SR: And what kind of wood do you use for smoking?

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KD: For smoking our sausages, we use oak and pecan. We—I like the flavor of the pecan, but if you use too much pecan you'll actually turn your sausage bitter, so—. And the oak has a nice flavor too, but the oak by itself doesn't have that little bit of pleasant taste that you would get from a—from a more, a bitter wood than pecan or mesquite or something in that nature.

00:25:26

SR: And so you also have jerky, which I tried some of.

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KD: Yes. We have jerky, and we use nothing but the best. We—we use a very, very lean gooseneck round to make that, and it does very, very well.

00:25:49

SR: What is that, what you just said—gooseneck round?

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KD: Right, that's the bottom round. It's the bottom part of the round steak.

00:25:57

SR: I haven't heard that term. And I am unfamiliar with the process of making jerky. How long does that take, approximately?

00:26:07

KD: Well the stripping of it, we—we cut everything into quarter-inch strips. We season it—well it's a little more than quarters; it's about three-eighths. We season it and put it in the cooler overnight, and then the next morning we take it out and hang it in the smokehouse, and it takes approximately six to eight hours to smoke it.

00:26:31

SR: It's very smokey, your product?

00:26:32

KD: Yes, yes. And—and the reason that we don't cut it thinner and dry it out—. I mean you can get that like the Oberto's, or you know the store bought jerkies—those are done with a lot of preservative, and you know you can take them hiking, camping for probably months on end and still—still be okay. Ours is more of a, maybe eat it within two or three days type product. We don't have any, we don't have any preservatives in it whatsoever. The only thing preserving it is the smoke from the smokehouse.

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SR: So if I bought some and opened the pack and had it in my car for two days, would that be okay?

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KD: If you had it in your car for two days you'd probably still be okay, but probably by the third or fourth day you would start seeing some mold growing on it, because there's no preservative to stop that process from happening.

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SR: Just wondering how long I can actually have it in my car. **[*Laughs*]**

00:27:37

KD: Now if you took it in your car for a day or two, and then brought it home and put it in the refrigerator, it would be okay.

00:27:43

SR: And Shelley just said you can't send it to Iraq.

00:27:46

KD: That is correct. By the time it would hit Iraq it would be—it would have mold. And I could preserve it. I could put the preservative on it. We could vacuum seal it down, preserve it. I don't want to affect the taste of it. That's why I'm—I won't do that.

00:28:02

SR: And so she just said that you did try to send it to Iraq.

00:28:05

KD: Right. Well we—we've had several mothers come through, and we said that we don't like to ship something that far because we don't know how long it will take to get there. The mothers insisted, and they sent it anyway and—and it did have some grow on it. But from what I understand, the guys in Iraq just wiped the mold off and still ate it.

00:28:29

SR: They were probably happy to get it anyway.

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KD: Right, right. And it's just you know—it was on the outside, so not really that big a deal.

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SR: Wow. Is tasso a popular in this part of the state?

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KD: Yes, yes, it is. It's—tasso, we make pork tasso and beef tasso. The pork tasso is the best seller by far, probably 20 to 1 over the beef tasso.

00:28:56

SR: And I think this is the first time I'm hearing of beef tasso. Why do you make that, and what would people use it for as opposed to the pork?

00:29:07

KD: Some people don't eat pork, so the beef tasso is basically giving that person the same opportunity to have tasso in their beans or soup or whatever they're going to put it in.

00:29:20

SR: Do you use tasso in any of the plate lunches that you make here?

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KD: Yes, we do. We—we put the tasso in gumbo, and also in beans.

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SR: Just for the record, what is tasso?

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KD: Tasso is just a nice lean smoked meat that's seasoned very well, and it is used for seasoning other products whenever you're cooking them.

00:29:47

SR: Do you make andouille?

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KD: No, we do not make an andouille sausage, just because we already have so many products on the shelves out there. That would just be one more thing that we would have to do, so we—we had to have a stopping point.

00:30:03

SR: But people use andouille in this part of the state?

00:30:08

KD: Well sure, sure. Andouille is a great sausage.

00:30:11

SR: Tell me about your boudin balls. I met a man when I walked in here who was raving about your boudin balls and buying a bunch of them, you know. Again, without giving out any secrets, can you tell me a little bit about how you go about making a boudin ball, and what it is?

00:30:27

KD: The boudin ball is just basically our boudin dressing, rolled into a ball, and then we batter it with our homemade batter and fry it, and that's a boudin ball. And I'll—I'll go as far as telling you that we sell thousands a week.

00:30:52

SR: And do people just eat them plain like that, or do they put ketchup on them, or—?

00:31:00

KD: We have them eat them all sorts of ways. From—from a mustard and mayonnaise concoction to a—to our spicy ketchup that we make here, or even pouring hot sauces and our seasonings outside. But most people just eat them plain, just like they are.

00:31:16

SR: How do you eat them?

00:31:20

KD: Plain.

00:31:22

SR: And that spicy ketchup, what is that—what is that like?

00:31:25

KD: That is a ketchup that we make here and it's just got a bit of a kick to it—little bite.

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SR: So this man that I met, he was buying—his name was Jeff—.

00:31:38

KD: Jeff Byrley.

00:31:38

SR: Jeff Byrley?

00:31:41

KD: Jeff Byrley, yeah. He's a really good friend of ours, and as a matter of fact his brother is one of my best friends, and his name is Christopher. And Jeff has been coming here since the day we opened. When he—when we first opened he felt like he needed to be part of helping us get on our feet because a business, you know the first few years is always tough. And then after he, after he came for while getting our boudin balls and boudin and whatnot to bring to his clients, I believe it's a necessity for him to get those products for those clients now because they ask for us by name.

00:32:23

SR: What kind of—what's his business?

00:32:24

KD: Jeff is a salesman. He sells to—to the major industries in this area. And Jeff says that if—if he's got a deal that's on the line with one of these customers, he brings them a couple dozen boudin balls and closes the deal.

00:32:44

SR: Do you have a lot of customers like that, that come in—you know, salesmen and that kind of stuff?

00:32:49

KD: That is a regular thing in the mornings that—we open at 7:00 a.m., and that we sell quite a bit of boudin and boudin balls by—by 8:30 or 9 o'clock in the morning.

00:33:03

SR: Wow. So you start up the deep fryer for those—or the oil for those boudin balls that early?

00:33:11

KD: We start cooking by 5:30 every morning.

00:33:14

SR: And wow, that's an intense way to start the day. **[*Laughs*]**

00:33:21

KD: Yes, Cajuns have just a couple of preferences in the morning: boudin balls or donuts. That's it, nothing else in this area. No, I'm kidding.

00:33:34

SR: **[*Laughs*]** And coffee?

00:33:36

KD: Yes. **[*Laughs*]**

00:33:35

SR: Do they drink coffee with boudin?

00:33:38

KD: Lots of Community Coffee, only, Cajuns only like Community Coffee, so there you go.

00:33:46

SR: All right. Well how would you characterize your clientele in general?

00:33:52

KD: Oh gosh, just a good group of people. We've—we've been open for six years now. I don't think we've had more than 10 complaints in six years. So a bunch of, bunch of good down-home folk. No—no problems as far as the crowds in here not intermingling.

00:34:16

SR: You're one of the youngest people I've met doing this kind of work. Do you know other people in your generation who are—are you know, making boudin and carrying on the sort of like fresh meat cutting tradition?

00:34:30

KD: I don't really. I don't really know of anybody. Oh, oh yes. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Michael Hollier. The real way to pronounce the name is **[*O-yah*]** but it's spelled H-o-l-l-i-e-r. His father Wayne has been in the business for, oh gosh, probably 25 years and—or even longer. Michael is a few years younger than myself and—and he's steady coming up after his dad, and just like my boy will be later after me.

00:35:11

SR: Yeah. And he's in Sulphur also?

00:35:12

KD: That is correct.

00:35:16

SR: Is there—oh their restaurant recently burned?

00:35:18

KD: Yes. They had—they had a total fire about four months ago, maybe five months ago. But hopefully they will be back up and running sometime in October.

00:35:32

SR: What is the name of their restaurant?

00:35:32

KD: Hollier's.

00:35:35

SR: Is there camaraderie between boudin makers, or competition, or a little bit of both?

00:35:43

KD: Oh gosh. You know, if you went to another city I would say that there may be a big competition factor, but in Sulphur—Sulphur is different than most towns. We all, we all get along. We all—if anyone needs anything from the other person all we have to do is make a phone call and—and we'll all help from one end to the other. The night Hollier's burned down they had a big catering job the next day. They called me at 4:00 in the morning. I came up here and opened the restaurant, and we cooked his catering meal for him for the next day, so they never missed a beat.

00:36:26

SR: Wow, that's really sweet.

00:36:28

KD: That's what we do. That's Sulphur. I would, I would say that if people reading this or—or hearing this interview would think about a nice little town, Sulphur would be the place.

00:36:42

SR: Do you know the population?

00:36:44

KD: I really don't. I'm thinking it's somewhere around 20,000.

00:36:51

SR: And what is the—I mean I guess the main industry, it's sort of obvious?

00:36:56

KD: Right. Well I don't know. It's pretty diverse. I mean we have the industries in this area, the refineries like Citgo and Conoco, but it's—a lot of people from this area also, you know, go as far as going to, to you know Lake Charles and the surrounding areas. But for work, but you know Sulphur pretty much takes care of itself.

00:37:21

SR: And your siblings, did they stay in this area?

00:37:23

KD: Yes, yes. My sister works out at Global Industries in Carlyss, and my little brother owns A&B Tobacco Store next door to me right here.

00:37:39

SR: Oh okay. I just, I just remembered that I wanted to ask you—on the web I think I saw on your menu a boudin burger. Do you still have it? Do you have that?

00:37:47

KD: Yes, we do. Boudin burger is a half a pound of boudin, and it is made into a patty and it's put through our same process as the boudin ball where it's, where it's coated and deep-fried and then it's put on a burger. And very, very good seller.

00:38:06

SR: Sounds good.

00:38:08

KD: I'll have to make you one of those and let you try it.

00:38:11

SR: I wouldn't turn that down. What about in your household, who does the cooking?

00:38:17

KD: Ninety-percent of the time The Sausage Link does the cooking. But no—my wife, she's a great cook. She cooks, we both cook quite a bit when we do cook at home. With the three children, it's—it's pretty tough as far as they all have dance and ball and cheer, and all the different things that we do. So a lot of times it's on the run and—and so The Sausage Link being our recipes that we use at home, we just go ahead and come here and eat.

00:39:00

SR: Well that's a good endorsement, I would say. What about, I'm also doing a project about gumbo, interviewing people about gumbo. You serve a gumbo here?

00:39:12

KD: Yes, we do. During the wintertime we have gumbo everyday. During the summertime, just Fridays. We could probably still serve it everyday because we get asked for our gumbo every single day, but I choose not to, not to do it all the time during the summertime. But yes, we—especially during Lent we may go through 30 or 40-gallons in—on a Friday during Lent.

00:39:46

SR: Wow. What kind of gumbo do you make?

00:39:49

KD: We make shrimp and crab gumbo, or chicken and sausage gumbo.

00:39:54

SR: And can I ask you a little bit about method? I mean—

00:39:58

KD: You want me, you want me to give you my roux recipe? I'll tell you right now. No one—and, and I'm being honest here—no one makes a better rue than Mrs. Savoy. That would be Savoy's Roux that you can buy in the grocery store. And I know everyone reading this is going, *Oh, my mama gave me a recipe*. Okay, my mama eats gumbo at my house and says, *Honey, you make roux just like mama used to make it. You do so good*. I say, *Mama, that's Mrs. Savoy*. So yes, Savoy's has a very good roux, and it's a great—for people who don't know how to make gumbo, read the directions on it and add just a little bit more than what they say to add to it to thicken your gravy a little, 'cause I don't like a thin gumbo. So anyway, that's—that's a great way to go.

00:40:54

SR: I've had a couple other people mention that brand in particular.

00:40:57

KD: Yeah. Savoy's is good.

00:40:59

SR: And so when you were growing up, I'm wondering at what point the pre-made rouxs started becoming really prominent. Do you remember from when you were a kid?

00:41:07

KD: Oh gosh. Well not at my house. My—just like I told you, my mother would always make her own roux, and—but the Savoy's came up with a recipe years ago. And as a matter of fact, I'm thinking before you and I **[speaking to Shelley]** were married, so probably 20 years they've been making that roux and, and doing real well with it.

00:41:34

SR: And do people in this area use filé in their gumbo?

00:41:37

KD: Well sure, sure. Filé in a, in a seafood gumbo. I don't put filé in my chicken and sausage gumbo. Your sausage gives it a great flavor already. Now if you needed to thicken it up a little bit you could, but that's why I say I like to use a little more roux in my chicken and sausage gumbo to thicken it up. I don't, I don't necessarily get that thick with my seafood gumbo, but then you add a little—a little filé to it and thicken it up.

00:42:09

SR: And do you add the filé yourself in the kitchen or—?

00:42:13

KD: Both, both. We do add some when—when we make our seafood gumbo, we do add it in the kitchen, but we also have it on the tables for the customers to add more if they want more.

00:42:25

SR: And what is the—I don't know the prominent characteristic of gumbo in this area? Is there like a certain—?

00:42:33

KD: Roux, no tomatoes. Tomatoes would be down East Creole-style, which—we call it more of a stew instead of, instead of a gumbo. I mean if we—when we make our gumbos here, if we put a tomato base in it with the roux, then we call it a stew. So and—and if it's a tomato base only, then we would call it a courtbouillon.

00:43:02

SR: Right. All right. And if you were to make a gumbo at home, what would you make? The same kind as you make here?

00:43:09

KD: Yes, it's the same recipe we use at home is what we use here.

00:43:16

SR: Okay. What about—

00:43:16

KD: Or if you eat at The Sausage Link, you basically are eating at Kevin and Shelley's house.

00:43:22

SR: Shelley, do you ever make boudin?

00:43:25

SD: Make it, uh-um.

00:43:26

KD: Never.

00:43:28

SR: I've been asking around; I haven't yet met a female boudin maker. Have you?

00:43:34

KD: No. I actually had a girl that worked—yeah, I had a girl that worked for me whenever I worked at Misse's that would actually help with the boudin and sausage making. If we finish this interview soon enough, I'll bring you in there and put some gloves on you and let you make some.

00:43:53

SD: You don't typically see many women working in a meat market, which I think is—.

00:44:02

SR: Right.

00:44:06

KD: It's very, it's very hands-on in the meat market. I mean it's, you know, you're talking about picking up 100-pound boxes all day long and—which you know, for some ladies that wouldn't be, you know, a good thing. I'm not saying ladies are frail by any—by any means; not wanting to get anybody mad at me. I'm just saying that, yeah, it's hard work. I mean when you take—when you take a 200-pound hind quarter and throw it over your shoulder, it's a lot of work.

00:44:38

SR: I would say so. Well I'd like to know a little bit about your tamales. I saw that on the menu too. You make tamales?

00:44:45

KD: We do. We have somebody that comes in and makes them here for us. Tamales are a lot of work. I really wasn't going to get into the tamale business, but I have a friend of mine that asked if he could come in and make the tamales for us, and I gave him that opportunity and now we sell—oh gosh, I don't know—probably 50, anywhere from 50 to 100 dozen a week.

00:45:10

SR: And they're beef?

00:45:14

KD: Yes.

00:45:15

SR: And wrapped? Is there any masa involved?

00:45:19

KD: Wrapped in cornmeal and—but ours aren't, ours aren't the kind with the corn husks.

00:45:28

SR: They're paper?

00:45:29

KD: Right, paper.

00:45:30

SR: And—

00:45:30

KD: And if you'd like to try those, we'll let you try those too.

00:45:32

SR: **[*Laughs*]** Okay. Is that a big tradition around in this area?

00:45:38

KD: Yes. Yeah tamales—oh gosh, I guess just about anywhere you go down south, you'll find tamales just about anywhere.

00:45:46

SR: And are they a big seller for you?

00:45:48

KD: Well 50 to 100 dozen a week, you know, which I don't advertise them at all—just we just have a little sign up. Probably if I advertised them it would be a whole lot more, but the guy who comes in and makes them for me, he can't make anymore than that. It's just a lot of work.

00:46:07

SR: Okay. Do you know—growing up around boudin, was there ever talk of the origins of that tradition, or do you have any ides about that?

00:46:17

KD: You know I don't really go back—back that far with it. All I've known, you know my whole life, is that we Cajuns eat boudin, and even as, even as a child I can remember back—five years-old butchering hogs, making the cracklings and the boudin and the sausage. So you know, it's just something that's always been prevalent in this area.

00:46:45

SR: And so did your family butcher hogs?

00:46:49

KD: Yes, we did and did all of the—my grandpa every year would—would raise four hogs a year and that was to help feed the family, and pretty much nothing went to waste.

00:47:02

SR: And you would butcher—he would butcher those hogs at different times of the year?

00:47:06

KD: That's correct, that's correct. A couple of different times of the year.

00:47:10

SR: And was that a big day? Would the whole family be there?

00:47:14

KD: Yes, yes. It would take the whole family to work up that much meat.

00:47:18

SR: And at the time—I mean you were growing up in this atmosphere, but at the time was it just another day when you saw a pig killed, or was it—I don't know—emotional for you? Or was it—did it seem totally normal?

00:47:35

KD: Never really emotional. We—you know we actually fed the animals everyday and had names for them, but I guess when—when you're growing up and you know that hog is bred for that purpose and—and fed out for that purpose, you never really think about it other than one day you're going to be eating Pork Chop's bacon.

00:48:01

SR: Pork Chop was one of the names?

00:48:00

KD: Pork Chop was a name, yes.

00:48:05

SR: What would you feed them?

00:48:06

KD: We would feed them pellets from the feed store and slop. Slop being anything leftover after dinner and—or breakfast. So I'm sure that they felt like that was a pretty good meal, you know, coming after breakfast to have a few scrambled eggs and possibly some bacon from the previous hog.

00:48:31

SR: Wow. Would you—that day when you know, butchering day or slaughtering day, would you call that a boucherie? I've heard that term around.

00:48:42

KD: Gosh, I don't know. We didn't call it that, but that's the term? Well there you go. That's the term. We just called it butchering day. **[*Laughs*]**

00:48:52

SR: And so you would make crackling on that day?

00:48:58

KD: Well it—we may have made cracklings that day, or we may have—we may have put the bellies in the freezer, you know. It depended on how big the hogs were. If the hogs were too big, well then you would, you would take the bellies and fold them and wrap them in paper and put them in the freezer, and then pull them out and cook them on another occasion, so—. And because if, you know it's—making cracklings is a big process. We make them here. You—you're talking about, probably for a batch of—60-pound batch of cracklings, which could come off of one hog, may take you six or seven or eight hours, you know. So—so that if we were already doing much more of the butchering and whatnot, then that would be maybe one of the things you'd put off.

00:49:52

SR: Well what—but boudin would be made?

00:49:58

KD: Not always on that day. Not always on that day, but yes. Boudin—but once again you could put that meat in the freezer and come back to it later. Your—the main thing was getting the hogs, you know, butchered out and actually—actually, a lot of the things that would happen was just to get the hog ready to hang for a few days in the cooler. 'Cause it's, like I said, it's a big process all the way around.

00:50:26

SR: And it—from what I understand, it's difficult to cut the meat when it's not cool.

00:50:31

KD: When it's hot, right, right. You have to hang it to cool it.

00:50:35

SR: Yeah. Was there a tradition in your family of using the head to make hogshead cheese or anything like that?

00:50:40

KD: That would be a negative. We always gave the head to a neighbor, but my neighbor did use the head and made the hogshead cheese, which was wonderful but—but we didn't actually do it ourselves.

00:50:51

SR: And what about the organs and stuff? Did you—I've been learning about cowboy stew. Would ya'll have that kind of thing?

00:51:01

KD: We, my family did not, but we did give away all of the organs to other people. Like I said, my boudin doesn't have liver in it, so that—that would take you a step further in saying this guy has never liked the organs.

00:51:17

SR: Right. I just have a couple more questions. I know you need to get to work. Tell me about how you keep your boudin warm for service, and then—and then what it looks like when you serve it. Do you wrap it in butcher paper or—?

00:51:34

KD: We actually have steamers, holding—actually holding trays which are warmers, and they have water in the bottom of them, which steams through the boudin and keeps it warm. To get the boudin ready to go in the steamers though is another process. We have, we have our water hot, just under boiling, and we put our boudin in it and that's a 10-minute process. And then you take it out and then put it in the steamers.

00:52:13

SR: And then how do you serve it?

00:52:14

KD: Just serve it out in trays. We have the—we usually just put them in the white hinged trays, and that way the person can either take it to the table and eat it here or take it to go in the same tray. The boudin—I'll tell you, my favorite way to eat boudin though is to be done on the barbeque pit. If you grill boudin, the casing gets extra crispy, and it—and it takes on a whole other flavor with the, with the smoke from the pit and it's really good.

00:52:44

SR: Do you sell it like that ever here?

00:52:47

KD: We actually smoke it in the smokehouse. We sell smoked boudin.

00:52:49

SR: Oh you do? Hot or prepackaged?

00:52:54

KD: Prepackaged to go.

00:52:57

SR: I've had a few people tell me that. I'm going to have to try it that way. What about, I noticed some other products on your shelves of apple syrup and the preserves—and who does that?

00:53:09

KD: Those all come from Paradise Farms, which is a Louisiana-based company not far from here. It's in the West Bay area. Mr. Ronnie, the guy who owns the farm, he started, he started all these products—the syrups and the jellies—a few years ago and introduced them to us, and we put them on our shelf. Everything on that shelf is either made by us at The Sausage Link or is a Louisiana company. There's nothing on that shelf out there that's not Louisiana. And, but Mr. Ronnie used to have West Bay Peach Farm, and when the hurricane come through—Hurricane Rita come through—it basically ruined every peach tree he had on the farm. So now that's his only business, is the syrups and jellies and whatnot.

00:54:06

SR: How did Hurricane Rita affect you—your business?

00:54:10

KD: It took the complete roof off of our building here. We had just built the building in 2001—2000--2001. When Rita came through, we actually had four people staying in here because they have, they live in trailers and they felt like the smokehouses here are made out of cinderblock and solid concrete and steel. So they figured if it got too bad they could go in one of those and they'd be all right. And—and everything worked out. I mean, like I said, the hurricane ripped the whole roof off this place, but the smokehouses were still standing and you know, nothing wrong with those. And—and so anyway we had another complete rebuild for it. It took us six months to come back online after Rita.

00:55:02

SR: And did those people stay in the smokehouse during the hurricane?

00:55:06

KD: Yes, they did.

00:55:08

SR: Were ya'll at your house in Sulphur, or did you evacuate?

00:55:12

KD: Oh no, we evacuated. We evacuated up to Mountain View, Arkansas—went and listened to the music on the Town Square. So while we were up enjoying the music on Town Square, Rita was bearing down on us.

00:55:29

SR: Wow. What about, how has business rebounded since then?

00:55:33

KD: Oh when—we had so many people—even we had people even asking if they could come and help us get back up and running, so we could, so we could get the boudin and everything back on the streets. But since—since we came back, business is even better than it was before.

00:55:58

SR: What about your staff? Were they all able to come back?

00:56:02

KD: We have 90—about 95-percent of the staff that we had before Rita stayed with us. We carried insurance that, that actually paid their salaries, what—or helped pay through the hurricane. Some left and—and we had one—was it right before we opened up, Shelley, that Jo passed away? Yeah, yeah. During the reconstruction when we were, when we were about to get back online, we had one of the ladies that worked here that passed away with a stroke. And we—as a matter of fact, we have a little picture of her out there, and—. But yeah, there was a lot of deaths after the hurricane. I think maybe a lot of stress, but I don't think I've ever seen that many names in the obituaries.

00:57:02

SR: I think that's true in a lot of the state, and even still maybe.

00:57:07

KD: Yeah, I believe so.

00:57:08

SR: People were probably craving boudin and the kinds of things that ya'll make after they came back.

00:57:15

KD: That—that's correct. But we, we're a Christian family, and we base everything on—on love and God and Jesus, so we don't feel like we have any problems. We—even with the roof gone, we didn't even, we didn't hesitate. We were okay with everything 'cause we knew that, you know, we were here for a purpose, and knew that we'd be coming back.

00:57:44

SR: Well that's a really good attitude. Did your house get damaged?

00:57:47

KD: No damage on the house at all.

00:57:51

SR: How many people can—does your restaurant really seat?

00:57:58

KD: Before the hurricane we could seat 100. We, we decided to cut that back a little bit after the hurricane, and we have seating out there for about 85.

00:58:12

SR: It strikes me when you were talking about your family's hog killing traditions—I mean your interest in this sort of thing could have been starting back then.

00:58:24

KD: Could be, could be. And we've always, my family has always hunted and fished and—and actually relied on that for a lot of our meat during the winter. We've always—we've always had a freezer full of wild game. I used to tease my parents and say I didn't know what beef meat was until I was 12 years old, because we ate so much wild game. But you know, just—just a big joke, but we did rely a bunch on what we, what we actually raised and—and actually went out and got in the field. Oh and seafood, yeah. Shoot, the industry here is—. My dad was a welder and a—and an outboard motor mechanic, and he would always work on the shrimp boats in this area. He would, he would fix their motors or he would—he would weld their butterfly frames. So sometimes we would get home and there would be two or three ice chests of shrimp on the, on the front porch waiting for us to come home and clean. So we always had freezers full of fish or shrimp or whatever, you know, to go along with the meat.

00:59:38

SR: Your mom was right: you weren't going to go hungry.

00:59:41

KD: Never go hungry, that's correct.

00:59:42

SR: What would y'all do with those squirrels that you hunted?

00:59:46

KD: Well we would eat them. You would make a gumbo or a stew or pot roast them down until the meat was so tender it was falling off the bones and very tasty.

00:59:56

SR: Do you like it?

00:59:58

KD: Sure.

00:59:59

SR: Shelley is shaking her head. I take it you don't serve that in your household much anymore.

01:00:04

KD: No, no, we've—

01:00:07

SD: There will be no squirrels.

01:00:08

KD: No. Just like, just like most of the heritage, things slip away and squirrels is one of the things that's been lost in our household.

01:00:19

SR: What about—I'm not sure if your parents are still alive.

01:00:23

KD: Yes, they are.

01:00:24

SR: And I actually—

01:00:25

KD: Do they still eat squirrel—yes. **[*Laughs*]** Yeah, my mom would eat just about anything. Now you talked about the cowboy stew earlier. Me personally, I would not eat the innards, but we used to have a really good friend, Louis Allemands, who has passed now; he would make—he would always make a big cowboy stew and invite the whole neighborhood over to come and eat, and my mother used to say how good it was.

01:00:54

SR: So just for the, for the recording, cowboy stew is—tell me if I'm right: it's sort of a rich, gravy made with innards?

01:01:05

KD: Made with the innards, that is correct.

01:01:08

SR: And eaten over rice?

01:01:10

KD: Yes.

01:01:12

SR: Okay, well I have one more question for you and then we'll wrap up. But I'm just curious: what do you enjoy most about your work here?

01:01:21

KD: I think it's seeing the enjoyment on the people's faces and—and being, I guess being brought out in crowds sometimes as saying that we have the best boudin and boudin balls around. From starting with, with no recipe and—and getting it going the day before we opened, and—and knowing now that it's probably one of the best boudins around.

01:01:51

SR: All right. Well thank you. Thank you for giving me your time.

01:01:55

KD: Sure.

01:01:59

[End Kevin Downs-Boudin Interview]