KEITH ALLEN
Allen & Son Barbeque – Chapel Hill, NC

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Date: May 31, 2007
Location: Allen & Son Barbeque – Chapel Hill, NC
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 18 seconds
Project: Chapel Hill Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin Keith Allen Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, May 31, 2007. I'm in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, at Allen & Son Barbeque with Mr. Keith Allen. And Mr. Allen, would you state your name and also your birth date for the record, please, sir?

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Keith Allen: Yes, my name is Keith Allen and I was born September 7, 1951.

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AE: And where were you born?

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KA: Burlington, North Carolina.

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AE: And what—what did your family do when you were growing up?

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KA: First, they worked in the mills. Then my dad was a car salesman, and my mom still continued to work in the mills. And then my grandparents, of course, were on the farm, and that's where I grew up—on the farm.

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AE: How many generations does your family go back in this area—in Burlington?

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KA: In the restaurant business itself?

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AE: No, just in—in North Carolina?

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KA: Oh, five or six—one side of my family got ran out of North Carolina and had to move to South Carolina because they were making moonshine, but other than that **[*Laughs*]** most of them are still here.

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AE: And so your—your grandparents farmed and—and your parents also?

00:01:04

KA: No, my grandparents farmed—that was my mother's parents—and I grew up right there adjacent to them, and they made their living and truck cropping at the curb markets and selling around the neighborhood and—and in essence, I grew up there. They were my babysitters; they were my daycare when I was out of school, and so they put me to work during daycare.

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AE: What kind of crops did they raise?

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KA: It was all truck crops—tomatoes, corn, you know, butter beans, watermelons, cantaloupes—whatever would sell. And my grandmother would make—she made desserts and

those kinds of things to sell at the curb market on Saturday mornings. We'd go up there at four o'clock in the morning and set-up and people would—the city folks would engage her to cook things and she would take them and—and sell.

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AE: So she would sell prepared items at the Farmers' Market?

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KA: Right, cakes and pies and—and cookies and different things that she made baking-wise.

00:02:01

AE: Hmm. And I understand you use a lot of her recipes here, is that right?

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KA: I do, yeah. I never had formal training in cooking, so whatever I do is inherently given to me by what I watched her do. **[*Phone Rings*]**

00:02:15

AE: Do you need to get that?

00:02:18

KA: Yeah.

[Recording is paused for approximately one minute, while Mr. Allen takes the phone call.]

00:02:18

AE: And what are your—what were your grandparents' names?

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KA: Sally Blanche was my mother—my grandmother on my mother's side, and Johnson T. O'Daniel was on my—my—her husband.

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AE: T.O., is that initials or is that a name?

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KA: It stands for O'Daniel—his middle initial was T and his last name was O'Daniel.

00:02:39

AE: And your parents' names?

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KA: James and Hazel Allen.

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AE: And so let's do talk about your family in the restaurant business and how that started.

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KA: Actually, my dad was a—he liked to drink a little and socialize a little, and he bought a restaurant one night and called the house and said, "I think I'm going into the restaurant business." And he was a car salesman at that point, and so all of a sudden we were in the restaurant business in the [nineteen] '50s—a little grill, gas pumps out front, sold a little beer, was between a tire recapping place and a Baylone Lounge, which was a night club and so we—we sold hot dogs and hamburgers. We had—we bought barbecue from a distributor, which was

not very good. And then we got—we graduated into the guy that actually owned the building would not renew the lease when he remodeled it, and so we bought another restaurant and moved. And that's how we got into the restaurant—into the barbecue business was in the late '50s, we got into the barbecue business by buying a restaurant from a guy.

00:03:51

AE: And that restaurant sold barbecue?

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KA: Yes, it was—Henry Hearn was the guy that we bought it from. He was getting—he was aging out [of the business], and his family was not interested; and my dad bought it from him, and I found myself working in a restaurant from the time I was nine years old until now.

00:04:10

AE: Uh-hmm. And do you think your father, when he got this wild hair to get a restaurant, do you think it was [an] I want to be my own boss kind of thing that made him want—want to do something like that?

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KA: You know, I ain't got the foggiest clue. I think he may have had too much to drink and some like—it sounded like a deal to him, and he was a car salesman and he made a deal and there we were. **[*Laughs*]** And so—but we did have a reputation of having really good hot dogs and—and we enjoyed, you know, some fairly good success in the little bitty grill, you know. And he kind of built his name to have quality behind it, and it worked over time. And I was kind of disappointed when we went into the barbecue business, that we didn't try to emphasize the hot

dogs more and—but I see that he had a better insight to things than I did. Of course, I was eleven or twelve years old, and so it was a little bit different.

00:05:01

AE: What was it about those hot dogs that made them so good?

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KA: I don't know. I've never been able to duplicate it since in any restaurant I've ever had. I've got the same ingredients. I've got the same hot dog. We had to change from—from a Jesse Jones to an Oscar Mayer because Jesse Jones lost their quality and we went—we stayed with an Oscar Mayer all beef hot dog, and we've got the same chili, we've got the same slaw, we've got the same onions, we—I don't know. It's just not the same. The only person who had a better hot dog than us was the Amos & Andy in Durham, and they had the world's best hot dog and chili and they lost—we lost that because the son was an alcoholic and died and the recipe went out and that was a lost game so—. So barbecue went to be the number one and the hot dog took second fiddle.

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AE: Do you think the—the fact that you can't replicate that hot dog, do you think that has something to do with, on the one hand, food memory, in that you can never replicate something that's that iconic in your own mind and on the other hand, the place where you had it?

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KA: It could have been the steam table; it could have been a lot of different elements that I can't duplicate in other places. It—you know we—it was just one of those unique items that you come

across and you can make and you can do it a million times, but you can't duplicate it somewhere else and—and, of course, the barbecue, I think, is the same way. I don't think it's a fast-food item. I don't think you can duplicate the same flavor a million times. But it's one of those things that you just have to do.

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AE: So when your father bought the restaurant that had been the barbecue restaurant, did he know what he was getting into as far as—as handmade barbecue?

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KA: No, we didn't know much about it. It was kind of on-the-job training type situation, and we had a pit that would cook sixty shoulders at a time and so we—we you know—I started cooking then and firing the pits and chopping the barbecue and seasoning it and—and it was kind of on-the-job training. And we were chasing the flavor and he—I noticed that he always tasted it every time he got through or when we ever—or when we got through chopping and we were chasing a taste then. We were chasing—still chasing the taste today and that's the way I know that it's right.

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AE: Well growing up in rural North Carolina and—and, you know, experiencing your grandparents' farm and all that, did you ever have pig-pickings growing up, and is there something that happened in your family life that was easy to carry through to the restaurant when you started doing barbecue?

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KA: Well actually pig-pickings didn't come into play until probably the late [nineteen] '70s. Before that it was just a chopped barbecue type situation and everything was buffet, you know. You could go to farm functions and you'd just—barbecue, slaw, hushpuppies. You'd do fire department fundraising, and you could go to church and fundraise and it was all—pig-pickings came into play as a—kind of a commercial element. People wanted to see the realistic thing because we started losing this culture even back then. We were losing great strides backwards, and so pig-pickings were a commercial way of showing other folks from other parts of the world what we did here. And so we'd wind up in somebody's backyard, feeding somebody from Ethiopia, and they wanted to see the whole pig there, and they wanted to show North Carolina barbecue and that's how that came to play. That wasn't really a basic—when we started the business.

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AE: But did you grow up with the tradition of hog killings in the community and—and maybe a smokehouse on your grandparents' farm or anything like that?

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KA: Oh yeah, we had all that. Every—every small farm had pigs and chickens and—and we actually killed and took hams and—and cured meat and everything to the curb market. We took eggs. We—you know, we had chickens. We did it all and so—but we didn't ever cook barbecue per se. We always sold the best part of the—of the pig and we kept sausage and the other things that we—that wasn't marketable.

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AE: Uh-hmm. So what did you think when your father got in the restaurant business and then you, by default, were in the restaurant business?

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KA: Well I was—you know, like I say, I was a kid, you know. I was eight or nine years old when all this really transpired. And they told me what they wanted me to do, and I did it. And I was used to working on a farm and used to getting up early and used to doing whatever they told me to do. I was—that's what you did in order to make a living and so you know, as—as anybody, you learn by practice and—and I got a lot of practice because my father was not the—the hands-on type. He was, you know, he was the guy that could see what to do and—and see that somebody else got it done, but he didn't want to get into it too much. So after a bit I became a butcher for the A&P store and, unbeknownst to me, my grandfather told me, he said, "That's an important job. You ought to learn that really well." And so I did practice it and—and I learned it really well when I was in high school and college. I did it right on through to make a living, and it really did come in handy to know all the different cuts of all the different animals and all the anatomy that you really learn doing that kind of job. Back then a butcher was truly a butcher, as Cliff [Collins] will tell you, you know. You broke the cows down. You, you know, you got it in—in halves and you took the quarters off and the ribs off and—and the shanks and you did it all. And it—it was really handy to know, as time progressed through my life. It was nice to know all that.

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AE: Um-hmm. And you went to college, too, correct?

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KA: I did. I went to Southern Pines to Sandhills Community College and then bought this on my lunch hour one summer because I didn't think the guy was doing a good enough job, and the guy that was eating with me told me that if I thought I could do any better, just buy it, and so I did. I sold my landscaping equipment, which I had bought, and I borrowed $3,000—bought the place on my lunch hour one Saturday. I had to—he told me he would take a personal check and $3,000 in cash. Well when I got here to buy it, he would not take the check; he would—he—he refused. He wanted cash only or a certified check. Well in 1970 the banks were not open on Saturday, and there was no such thing as ATM, and bankers didn't know you. And so I called the banker, and he was nice enough to meet me at the bank and give me a certified check, and I did buy it on my lunch hour. And the next Monday morning I went to work. And that was what, thirty-seven years ago or something.

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AE: So to backup a little bit, first I want to ask you the name of the hot dog place and then the—the first restaurant that your father purchased that was the old barbecue restaurant.

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KA: The original name of the barbecue restaurant? The original name was Henry Hearns and it was a drive-in. The barbecue—the hot dog—we just had Allen's Amoco because it was—we sold gas and we sold white gas, and it was an Amoco station. And we sold hot dogs on the side kind of like these old 7-11s [convenience stores] do now, trying to add a grill. And then we went from the—the Allen's Amoco to Henry Hearns Barbecue Restaurant and we bought that kind of on a consignment. If we'd make it a year, you know, then we—we'd pay rent and then we'd buy

it if we could survive. And so we did and—and so we—we bought it and then we went from there. And it was a drive-in. It was all the people in the community would come there on Saturday nights. They would dance out on the patio and it was a jukebox and—and it was a drive-in, where you had soft-served ice cream and hot dogs and hamburgers and barbecue. And it was a hot spot in the country setting.

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AE: Where was it located, exactly?

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KA: It was at Bynum, North Carolina, which is straight down the Haw River from one end to the other, and there was—it's a mill town. Bynum is a mill town, as well—or was then—cotton mill.

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AE: And then what did you study in college?

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KA: Well I went to school to be for business—the first school I went to—and I got really bored with that. Since I had been in business a long time, what they were teaching me was pretty elementary, I thought. Of course, I was a smart aleck, anyway. So when I went back to school at [North Carolina] State [University] I went back to school to become—for education. And I thought I would like to teach. And also, that has came in really handy, relaying what I needed to get accomplished to other people. So the educational part of it has been just as handy as business ever thought about being so—.

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AE: So did you get a degree in education from State?

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KA: No, I think they—I just didn't have time. What happened was, you know, I would go all winter and do semester after semester, and then when spring came, I was so busy with catering and landscaping, I could not get that semester finished. And so then I'd try again the next year, and then it just got where I was too busy to finish up. I promised Coach Rabb [the late Walter Rabb, legendary UNC baseball coach] that I would finish one day, and I promised myself that I would actually get a degree one day, whenever I had time. I just hadn't had time to stop and do it.

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AE: Uh-hmm. So you mentioned catering and landscaping while you were in college. You were catering for your father's place and then started a landscaping business on your own on the side?

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KA: No, it was kind of reversed. I wanted to do landscaping, and I was always impressed with two or three guys that was doing it, and I really liked doing landscaping. So—and I had a natural knack for it, so I liked—I liked doing the landscaping. So I bought landscaping equipment when I was in college. When we started catering, it was way after that and—and I did my first catering party out of a backseat of a '57 Chevrolet, and I took the seat out and put the whole pig in it wrapped in tin foil and took it to a party. Of course, it cut down on the rust for the '57 Chevrolet because it was a lot of grease back there, **[*Laughs*]** but that was how we got started. Before that

it was just, you know, a farm dinner or something. I never thought about it being in catering. But when I got into catering, I had envisioned that we would do it completely for the person, so that it—the group that we were doing it for—the husband and wife or—or company would not have to worry about details. And we could do what they wanted to get done without them having to be involved and—and they could entertain their guests. And so I wanted to do it completely from tables to tablecloths to the drinks or whatever they needed; I wanted to be able to do it without them worrying. And that's—that was always a driving force to catering for me.

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AE: And did you initiate that idea to—to begin catering within the family business or was that something you had always all talked about?

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KA: Well what actually happened was we had—we had some bad luck. My dad died about thirty-three, thirty-four years ago [1973 or 1974], you know, so I was relatively young when he passed away. I was like twenty-three, twenty-four, and I wound up with two businesses—one to help my mother run the original business, and I already had this one, and I was opening up another. And so my dad really didn't get into the catering business. It didn't really derive with him. He really didn't know I had this restaurant for three or four weeks after I had bought it, so that was something that I just chased on my own.

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AE: Uh-hmm. And now the original restaurant, was that called Allen & Sons also?

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KA: It was originally named that after we bought it out, that's correct.

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AE: Do you have any siblings?

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KA: I have one sister.

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AE: Okay, so it is Allen & Son, singular? It's easy to say plural. **[*Laughs*]**

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KA: Well my sister—my sister never wanted to be involved in the restaurant business. She told my father that she would like to make a living not having to work like this and restaurant work is—is pretty hefty work and pretty steady and long hours. And she was not interested in that, so she went to work for Blue Cross & Blue Shield and retired from that.

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AE: What's your sister's name?

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KA: Brenda.

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AE: And so the restaurant we're standing in, is the restaurant you bought on your lunch hour?

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KA: That's correct, yeah.

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AE: And so I'm just curious that, since you grew up in the restaurant business basically, and then had this landscaping business and—do you need to tend to your fire? Yeah, okay, well we can pause. I can let this question ruminate.

00:17:36

KA: Okay.

[Recording is paused for approximately five minutes, while Mr. Allen tends to the pit.]

00:17:42

AE: All right, we're back with Mr. Allen after he tended his fire. And I was just going to ask you if you could kind of articulate what was going on in your head when you were in school, had a landscaping business, doing catering for your family restaurant, and then you wanted to buy a restaurant of your own?

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KA: Well I bought a restaurant of my own because I needed to earn money. And so I knew I could do that because I had been in it a long time. I had been in the restaurant business since I was nine years old, and so I pretty much understood what it took to do a restaurant. And I did understand that the restaurant that I was buying was not being done, in my opinion, as well it could be done or should be done, and so I thought I could improve it. Of course, I watched a lot of people go by the restaurant after I bought it and go eat somewhere else. **[*Laughs*]** And it was just a little place, and it was in the middle of the country in 1970. It was—you know, this is

pretty country out here; there was not a stoplight between where we were at and Franklin Street and Chapel Hill, which is seven or eight miles up the road. And so it was a struggle to make a living in the country and especially, when the gas shortage hit in the early '70s there. People went home at five o'clock, and they didn't get out again. And so in essence, you know, we didn't have much of a nighttime business during that gas shortage period. So it was kind of touch-and-go for a long time. You know, of course, I was single, and I was on my own and, you know, I only had to feed myself and make payments.

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AE: Uh-hmm. And what was the original name of—of this place when you bought it?

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KA: Turner's Barbecue. The guy that I bought it from, his name was Meaty Turner. Truly, it was Meaty Turner and he was from Carrboro. And he would be open a week or two, and then he'd be closed three or four weeks, if he wanted to. So it was he and his wife that ran it; they were elderly. And, you know, they were not that energetic about it.

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AE: So it sounds like, then, they weren't necessarily very good business people, but did they have good barbecue?

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KA: You know, I don't know about their barbecue. I've never eaten their barbecue. I've never eaten anybody's barbecue, matter of fact. The—but, you know, they were—they were really nice people. It just didn't seem like the application of the restaurant itself was fluent, was—was like it

ought to be when I came out to eat on my lunch hour. And I just—I had seen a lot of restaurants ran and—and the overall aspect didn't seem to be something that would work, in my mind.

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AE: So did you see it as a challenge, then, to make it what you thought it could be?

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KA: Well I—I thought I could improve it some. Now I don't know that I did that, but I thought I could, you know. Of course, the little train thought he could, too. So it's one of those things you always try to improve whatever you do, at least I—that's what you start in it for.

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AE: When you got this place and it was your own, did you change anything that had been done at your father's place and—and anything that you learned coming up in the restaurant business?

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KA: I really couldn't change a lot; I didn't have any money. I had $452 in the bank; I had $100 payments on a car. It was practically new, and I put the $452 into groceries. I owed $3,000 at the bank, and I owed for my car, and I was broke. So I worked with what I had at the moment, and I basically did then what I'm doing now, cooking with wood and on and on and on. And I did the same thing at my dad's place. I cooked with wood down there, as well. So the—the only things that I changed, probably, was trying to make everything that I did as right as I could do it, and I could do what I wanted to do, how I wanted to do it, without being told to change. And if somebody else runs a business and you work for them—I don't care if it's your dad or somebody else—you need to do it their way. And until you're able to do it on your own, you're not able to

do it your way. And you shouldn't do it your way, unless you've discussed it and worked it out. You should do it their way. And so I made up my mind years later that I was going to take what I thought was—we had a lot of frozen food, frozen shrimp, frozen this—frozen that and I, over time, eliminated all items that I could and decided that I would make this restaurant as good as I possibly could for it to be a barbecue restaurant, knowing that a barbecue restaurant does not carry the clout that a—that a steakhouse does. It's a secondary meat; it's a secondary restaurant; it's, you know—it's never had the glamour or the glitter, the ambiance, the chandeliers—it's just a basic restaurant. But I wanted it to make the food as good as it could possibly be made for the price that you could charge. So if it took a little more money out of my pocket to make it really good, then I'd make it really good—the pies, the cakes, the desserts, the meats—all fresh as you could find it—pay more for it, it didn't matter. Quality was everything. The customer was *the* one, *the* thing that I was shooting for so that they had a good experience, and that was my driving force between—overall—was making sure that whatever they got was the best that could be gotten.

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AE: Did you know immediately that you wanted to or were going to use family recipes for your—your grandmother's cakes and things and sides, or did that just kind of fit itself in?

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KA: Well, you know, I tried not to get overly involved in the restaurant. I didn't want the restaurant to depend on me ninety-nine percent of the time. I tried not to cook everything myself. I tried to stay kind of loose from it because I was still doing landscaping, and I needed time. I still was working on the farm. I needed time. But over time it just evolved to the fact that, in

order to make it as right as possible—we lost a culture of really good cooks over the years. We've—the whole area—the whole country has lost really good basic ordinary run of the mill, off-the-farm, out-of-the-kitchen cooks. Women went to work; men didn't know; people didn't care. It was beginning to be fast food. I couldn't find anybody that could do anything. So it fell to my shoulders to do whatever needed to be done. If I was going to do it right, then I had to do it. And so it's kind of caught me up in the draft of what I wound up doing now is sixteen, eighteen different desserts. They're all homemade. Everything is as good as you can make it, or as good as I can make it. And I'm not a trained chef, so I, you know, I have handicaps. But it fell to me to do it because you couldn't hire anybody else that was interested to do it right.

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AE: So you enjoy cooking?

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KA: Well, I did. **[*Laughs*]** Yeah, I guess I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here everyday seven days a week, trying to, you know, do it as right as I do. I guess I still do—I still think that I'm chasing the dream, and I'm still chasing the flavor, and I'm still wanting it to be right more than I am enjoying the cooking part of it. I think after a while everything gets to be a job, but I still want—I still have envisioned that, if I was sitting in there in the dining room and ordering a meal and I was going to be on the recipient end, that I would want it right and I—that's still my driving force. And so in order for that to be satisfied, I still do it the best I can. So I guess enjoyment may come into it; dedication may come into it more.

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AE: So would you say if—if you're saying that you're driven by the customer satisfaction in that they get a good product that's the best it can be, is there—can you describe, maybe, the other elements of what you do and what you enjoy about what you do and also keeping traditions alive in barbecue and—and family recipes and things of that nature?

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KA: Well I—my dad's recipe worked for the barbecue sauce that we had. I always thought it was the best sauce that could be mixed into a batch of meat. It always turned out really well. So I think that his recipe for the barbecue sauce had nothing to do with me—is undoubtedly perfect. There's nothing else to do to it; I had nothing to do with it. I haven't changed it. I just keep duplicating it. My grandmother's recipes, she was known to be a really good cook in the church, so I just followed practice. Just whatever I saw whenever she was making them, I just practiced it over time. I think that the—from this point forward, the art of cooking with wood is semi-going to be lost. There's going to be the odd guy that's going to chase this thing. There ought to be more. When I started, this was not unique; this was the ordinary. This was what everybody did. This is the only way to do it. I think now the only reason that maybe I stand out is because so many people have gotten away from the quality aspect of it and the taste aspect of it and got into the volume aspect of it. You can brag about going to Washington and feeding 1,000 folks, but are they really happy or did you go into a backyard and feed fifty folks that was really impressed? And for me, that exchange between the hickory coals and the grease drippings on that hickory coals over a period of a long time—eight to twelve hours—chopping it by hand and not losing the—the juices and the flavors that you built into it all day, season it properly, looking after it yourself from conception to end is going to be a dying art because nobody wants to put in this kind of volume or labor. And then to stop this, put a pig on a grill, go to somebody's house,

somebody's backyard and spend another four hours feeding another group after you've already put in twelve hours—there's just not an everyday guy that's going to do this kind of stuff. And I'm sure that people can hire people to do these things but are you getting—two, still getting the customer satisfied the way it ought to be? So it's—it's going to be a dying art.

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AE: Well, it definitely already is. So what does it mean to you personally, emotionally, and intellectually to spend ten hours a day everyday with hickory, smoke, fire, and pork?

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KA: Well basically, it's pretty dumb. But beyond that **[*Laughs*]** and you're dedicated to it. You've told somebody that you would do it, and your word ought to be bound. And I don't do contracts. I don't sign contracts with people. When people call me and they engage me to do a party and I say, "I will," and they give me a date and they give me a time and they give me a number, they give me what they would like to be served, and I show up. And for this to carry on and—and for people to be interested in this—and that's really what it's all about is the customer themselves are basically interested in this quality because I have them come back here to the pits everyday from all walks of life, even the local yokels come in here and want to see how it's done, and they grew up here. They must have seen a dozen pig pickings, you know. You kind of expect a guy from New Jersey not to understand it. Or a person from California. I mean, it's not what they do there, and you expect to show up, maybe, back here. But I think there is still enough interest in quality and this kind of cooking that would—that would justify anybody that was interested in doing a restaurant to do this and carry it on. I would hope that somebody somewhere would—would always—there would always be a best in everything somewhere.

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AE: And what do you love most about what you do here?

00:30:27

KA: The leaving time. **[*Laughs*]** I guess I like the splitting of the wood, the cutting of the trees, the recycling of the trees. We do a lot of storm damage stuff; we go out and gather up out of somebody's yard a tree that's been a nuisance that somebody don't want anymore. They cut it down; we haul it off; we burn it; we recycle it; we cook with it; and we turn it into ashes, instead of going to the landfill and filling up things. I kind of like that recycling prospect of what we do, and we're not wasting anything, and I kind of like doing it that way and I don't like—I don't just go out and cut trees down. We buy slabs from a friend of mine who has got a sawmill, and we go retrieve those and—and he cuts for railroad ties and this is a leftover for him, so it works hand in hand. All these kinds of things are kind of my recycling kind of program, rather than plastic bottles. So I kind of like that aspect of it. I like not wasting things and—and not taking a big step or a big bite out of Mother Nature. I don't like to leave a big imprint on Mother Earth. I think that what we're doing is responsible. I know we put out some emissions over the smoke and—and this hickory wood burning but I think in—in essence it—it would outweigh what we're recycling and what we're not taking to the landfill and what is not being wasted, I think, would outweigh what we're putting back in.

00:31:53

AE: And the byproduct, of course, of the smoke is a good thing.

00:31:56

KA: Well the byproduct is—is what the customer is chasing. They don't care about all the smoke or whether we're doing good things or not. They just want it to taste good and—and that's obvious when they come back here and you've got a group of four or five and you pull the pit out and you pull a piece of meat out, and they go to gnawing on it right there off the grill. It's obvious they're here just for the meat. They don't care whether you live or die as long as you've got it cooked right so—.

00:32:17

AE: Do you develop—and this is a weird question—but do you develop or have you over the years developed a relationship with the meat? Meaning you're around it everyday, you know what it needs and what it requires and you're touching it everyday? And I think maybe I'm getting to where we—you were turning the shoulders earlier and we were talking about that—the whole pig in there or part of a whole pig in there and—just how you kind of interact with the pork, maybe?

00:32:44

KA: Well, you know, we try to—we try to find the best pork we can find to—and we have a small distributor we buy from, and he brings it in, and it's two days old. And we don't want it frozen, and we don't want it dried, and we don't want it Cryovac-ed, want it fresh. And I know what fresh is because I used to kill them on the farm, and I know what fresh pork looks like. And I was a butcher, so I know what fresh is, and I know what old is. And so I want my pork to be fresh. And when I start out—and when I—there's no gauges on what I do. There's no panels, there's no instrument panels, there's no controls, there's no lights, there's no signals of any kind to tell you whether to turn it off, turn it on, heat it up, cool it down. You either got to know by

looking at the meat, or you don't know. And if you don't know, it's going to cost you in the end. I've had some guys in here from Smithfield Packers ask me how—what kind of yield I got out, and I told them somewhere around sixty percent, and they said, "That's impossible." I said, "Well, I can show you. I can show you what I put on, and I can show you what I take off, and I can prove that I can do that." And the way you do that is you don't burn it, and you don't waste it, and you don't dry it out. You get a good product that—that will do that for you and you—you take patience with it and time with it. You can't cook a thick piece of meat in four or five hours. I don't even like to cook chicken in four or five hours; I like to cook chicken in eight or ten hours. I like for it to be tender all the way through, done all the way through, and you look at it—you feel it. And if you—you can't see it that way, you don't understand what you're doing, and you learn those things over time and efforts and being exposed to it, and you don't get that out of going to school.

00:34:30

AE: Yeah. And it seems like you have an internal clock, let's say, to just—I mean thirty minutes for nine hours everyday. You know hen that happens and you get used to it, but it's kind of a—you know, you've developed this rhythm to what you do.

00:34:44

KA: Well, you know, I come to work at three o'clock [in the morning]. I don't have an alarm clock, either. I get up and I wake up two o'clock, I take a bath, and I come to work. And I go to work and I don't—I don't stop and have coffee. I don't stop and have breakfast. I mean I come to work. I light a fire, and I put the meat on. Every thirty minutes after that, I've got to fire the pits until that meat is done, and that may take me eight hours, and it may take me nine and, you

know, that pretty much—after you turn it over, how long it's going to take you from that point forward because you can tell by the fill of the meat and the wrinkles in the skin and—and how tender the meat has gotten at that point is how much more time it takes. And you know that—that coals can be hotter or cooler, the wood can be hotter or cooler, and the temperatures outside you have to overcome. In the wintertime you're starting out with a pit that—it may be twenty degrees in that kitchen and in that oven, and you've got to go from twenty to 190-degrees, and you've got to do it pretty quick, if you're going to get done that day. So—and you're working with wood. So there's a—a lot to learn and it's pretty dumb stuff, too, at the same point in time. I mean it's pretty elementary. I mean you've got a metal pit and you've got a firebox—a fireplace here with wood burning in it. I mean it doesn't take a rocket scientist to do this.

00:35:55

AE: But you designed this pit. Can you talk about that design a little bit?

00:35:59

KA: Well I designed the kitchen in itself, where I actually cook the pigs. It's a room with two doors—one on either end and—and I use those for baffles, like you would a woodstove, and I can control the burn of the wood. I can control the smoke exposure to the meat by opening and closing the doors like you would a woodstove with ventilation. The more you—the air it gets the faster it burns. The—less, of course, the slower it burns. And if you can keep it shut up, you can—you can keep that smoke rolling around the meat longer, and you get better exposure to the heat and the smoke.

00:36:34

AE: And so every thirty minutes you're checking the fire and adding more coals?

00:36:38

KA: You—you're trying to maintain that temperature. Every thirty minutes is about a span of time that hickory wood will lose its BTUs enough to—to need a fresher-upper in order to get that temperature and maintain it at that temperature of cooking. It's got to be slow, and it's got to be consistent. You can't—you can't have highs and lows. If you do, you'll wind up with a raw piece of meat.

00:37:03

AE: Well, and speaking of the meat, where do you think your—what you do falls into the tradition of North Carolina barbecue?

00:37:12

KA: This is the tradition of North Carolina barbecue. **[*Laughs*]** This is all it's all about. Everybody else is doing it for money or doing it for speed or doing it for accuracy. This is what it's about. You're either cooking with wood over a—a long period of time and trying to get that taste that—that the customers endure to—to chase around and to try to find places like this to eat at. If they didn't do the endeavor, I probably wouldn't do the endeavor because if they didn't show up to eat, I wouldn't show up to cook. So if this is not the original way of doing it—this is not the only way to really get high-quality barbecue—then I've missed the base somewhere all these years.

00:37:54

AE: Uh-hmm. And what do you think makes your—your place and your barbecue different or standout from the rest?

00:38:00

KA: Well an executive from Keenan Oil Company came out years ago and told me, he said, "Son," he said, "you've got the lousiest place to have a restaurant I've ever seen. Your location is right here in the middle of nowhere." He said, "Do you have any clue what you could be doing if you were at Main Street or somewhere around folks more handy?" And I said, you know, "I know," you know, "what you're talking about. I mean you're running a big corporation." I said, "But," you know, "I never really wanted to be handy. I wanted the people that really wanted to have good food, would make an effort to come here to eat, and therefore I'd make an effort to cook it right." And I said, "Between the two of us, we'd probably wind up with a good product. But if I was just handy and I was just after money, then I needed to be on a corner somewhere with a stoplight at it, where people were walking around and just falling in over it and just grabbing something to eat because it was—was there." And so where I'm at and out here in the country I get to watch the birds, and I get to watch the squirrels, and I get to watch the crows, and I get to here the sounds of the morning come alive. The sun does not catch me in bed. I've seen the sunrise many a time. I enjoy that endeavor. I enjoy the animals. I do not like the sounds of town. I grew up on a farm. I don't need more traffic. I don't need more cars. I drive four-and-a-half miles to work and four-and-a-half miles home. I live on a—a mile [long] driveway; I live at the end of the driveway. I like quiet times. I like to see Mother Nature. I do not care about Interstate 40, unless I'm trying to get from Point A to Point B. So the country is a bad location for a business, but it works for me.

00:39:56

AE: So what do you think is the future of—of barbecue, describing gentrification and cities and interstates being put up and—and changing the face of barbecue, as the tradition that you've been describing?

00:40:07

KA: Well North Carolina is destined to be one of the heaviest populated states on the East Coast here in the next ten years, fifteen years most. We're going to have more congestion. We're going to have more cars and more people and less maneuverability. We're going to have somebody come out here from EPA one day and say, "Well we're not going to allow this anymore," maybe. But that's been an excuse for a lot of barbecue people to get out of the business, but it's never been put in law. Nobody has ever really said that you can't have one here or there or whatever. The Fire Marshalls come and they go and you—open fires and different things. We've never caught anything on fire. We've never had a problem with anything. I think over the years the population of—of this area is going to grow, and I still believe that there is going to be room enough for the person that wants to do it right—just like there is in pottery, flowers, anything else. I think there's room for the person that really wants to do it right. In every culture there's got to be somebody in every aspect of everything that's going to be *the one* that does it to the best of his ability. It may not be the best that can be done, but it may be the best of his ability. And I think that there's always room for that one person. There's—there's one—[Frank] Lloyd Wright that designed houses; there's one chair maker; there's one guy that makes better pottery; there's Owens that—that make pottery and they're known, and I think there's always room for that one person to be better than—than maybe the next guy.

00:41:46

AE: Well and you're not talking about restaurants; you're talking about barbecue as craft and as—as part of a cultural tradition that is a handwork.

00:41:52

KA: Well it is in North Carolina. North Carolina is known to be the place for truly good southern barbecue. Now everybody has got it; the South has got it and the North has got it; Texas has got it; Memphis has got it. A lot of these boys are trying to catch on, but North Carolina has always been known to have two different kinds of barbecue. Both are really good; both could arguably be the best. We're between the best on both ends of the state. We try to keep our mouths shut, our heads down low. **[*Laughs*]** We try not to say anything about anybody else's stuff. We don't want those big boys to come over here and step on us. But there is—North Carolina is the place to have really good vinegar-based barbecue. I've tried it in Texas. I thought I could bring that brisket back here and—and make that Texas barbecue everybody talks about. I tried it in several places. I drove down there. I hunted down there. I tried—the local people showed me this and showed me that. It was too saucy, too covered up. There's not—in my opinion, that food is not a good mix to qualify the meat and quantify the sauce. There's too much sauce and not enough meat or too much meat and not enough sauce. You've got to not cover up food; you've got to work with it. And if you don't blend things together and one overwhelms the other, then you've missed the recipe entirely. There's a recipe for everything. Anybody can take a recipe and cook and if you follow that recipe, there's not one overwhelming anything in that recipe. There will be a blend of all to make something taste a certain way, and I think barbecue is that. You've got to—you've got to blend it. You've got to have the taste of the meat and taste of the sauce, but you can't overpower either one.

00:43:59

AE: Well and barbecue is so of the place. I mean, you were talking about trying to bring brisket up to North Carolina and I—and there are so many differences throughout the region in barbecue, obviously, as you just alluded to, I wonder what you think about any innovation in barbecue and—and with people being so transient now and so many people from all over being in Chapel Hill, for example, if it—if you think that North Carolina barbecue will stay North Carolina barbecue or you think there's a day where it will be kind of muddied up with things from other places to serve the tastes of people who are coming from other places.

00:44:37

KA: Well people will do most anything for money, and if there's enough money in it, they'll make tacos and they'll make brisket barbecue and most anything, you know, and they'll sell it. But the true quality of North Carolina lies in the vinegar-based barbecue, and anybody that's going to try to bring something else here is—is going to play second fiddle to that. It—they will never overcome if we're—if the barbecue people in this state are smart enough, they will never overwhelm the quality of which we've already set forth and the standards in which we go by. And if we're dumb, we'll let them overwhelm us, but I don't think we're that slow anymore in the South that we will. I think we're—we're apt enough to be able to always maintain a high quality of North Carolina barbecue in North Carolina. And I don't really believe that you should try to be something from somewhere else. I think you ought to be what you are where you are, and I've always been a Southern cook. I don't make pastas; I don't try to make tacos; I don't do Italian foods; I don't do French cooking; I don't do pastries. I do baking; I do basic cooking; I do

butter beans and corn. I do sliced tomatoes. I do things from the farm. I do things Southern; that's what I know. I'm not trying to be something else.

00:46:06

AE: So what's the future of your place here, then?

00:46:07

KA: Well it's going to be up to the next generation. You know, somebody has an opportunity to increase it and do better and do more or do it at all. That's going to be up to another generation to—to decide that. And there is—I'm sure there's somebody somewhere that's interested in—as I was. You know, maybe they're a little slow like I was, and you can't do anything other than this but somebody sometime will—will carry this on.

00:46:39

AE: Do you have children of your own?

00:46:40

KA: I have a daughter, but she's too smart for this. She's going to do something really intelligent, I hope. **[*Laughs*]**

00:46:44

AE: What's her name?

00:46:45

KA: Jessica Allen.

00:46:47

AE: So do you have an idea of maybe wanting to seek someone out to apprentice with you and that can work with you and you can show them the ropes, or are you just kind of hopeful that—that person will show up?

00:46:58

KA: Well, you know, I was talking to the Agricultural Commissioner yesterday and he was—his son-in-law is an attorney, and they do corporate deals—international/national deals—and he—he needs somebody that can detail and do these things. And I said, "Well God, as many people that's graduated from law school as there is, there ought to be somebody." He said he don't think that's something that you can learn. You inherently know it, feel it, want it, or you can't do it. And I think maybe that may be true here. I don't think I can seek them out. I think they're either going to stumble in here and need an opportunity and want to have—have a drive and have motivation and be willing to endeavor what it takes to do it, or you're not going to find them.

00:47:44

AE: Do you need to check your coals?

00:47:48

KA: No, I'm okay.

00:47:50

AE: Well and you've been getting a lot of attention, too. I'm here for one and, you know, people come and—and talk to you and get your story and want to, you know, learn from your, you know, thirty-plus years in the business. Why do you think that is?

00:48:05

KA: I don't know. **[*Laughs*]** A lot of people must be out of things to do. I told somebody, I said, "You guys are out of someplace to go or somebody to talk about," you know. When they did an article in the *Los Angeles Times,* I said, "Those people in California are starving for something to read about." You know, I guess if—if you're doing something that you really like and you really are entrenched in it, and you're trying to do it to the best of your abilities, people are interested in anything that anybody that is that dedicated to. And I think it's more of that, than it is that we're setting great goals or great hurdles or—or doing great things. I think that people just see it in you or—or feel the—when they come here—we had some people in here from Kansas. They came here and spent a week in the—the state riding around and looking at different barbecue places. And when they came back and talked to me for two or three hours and they said, you know, it was really good, from the waitress to the food to the desserts to the lives out back at the pits. It was all really good; it was a great experience. And I think that's one reason that people are really interested in it—is it's a good experience. They come here, they go to school here, they remember this, they come back, they go to reunions; it's something that they remember as a fond time. They've had parties and they've enjoyed themselves and they've had a beer and they've had a pig and they've been on campus and they've done this and they've done that. They've gotten married. God knows how many people we've got married over years that come back and say, "Oh, you did my wedding, da-di-da—da-da," you know. And it's a fond memory that we build. And I think pig pickings and barbecues have built a lot of fire departments, they've built a

lot of churches; they've fundraised, and people look at them as something they can do to get things accomplished. And if you can have a pig picking, and you can have all your fellow companions around and talk and conversate and get things accomplished over a good meal, maybe that's all it takes is just a good meal to—to get those things done. We're going up to David Price's office and do a show in—a dinner for him in Washington. We've done this before, and if it takes a dinner from North Carolina to get those other Congressmen together to—to get something done, I'll give him the dinner. So you know that's—and I think that's one thing; I think people accomplish a lot over a meal.

00:50:51

AE: Definitely. Well and I'm here because the Southern Foodways Alliance is recognizing you with the—or a Guardian—or Tabasco Guardians of the Tradition Award and recognize you as someone who is keeping alive tradition and—and traditional foodways in the South. What does that mean to you to be recognized for something like that?

00:51:11

KA: Well **[*Laughs*]** I told somebody, I'm not much at tooting my own horn, you know. It's nice that people are recognizing the fact that I'm putting forth efforts to do this thing and—and I think it's great that people are interested in it. And, you know, that's what it takes more than anything else is that people keep that interest up. Because if it wasn't for them it—there's no need for me. And so to be recognized and to get exposed to other folks from other places in other states that are interested in the same thing—the high quality, that really good—that enjoyable moment and they get a chance to get here and enjoy, then I've pretty much fulfilled what I need to do. And I

think it's—if I can get this exposure—to somebody that—that through this interview, through this recognition, and they get here and have fond memories, then I've accomplished my deal.

00:52:07

AE: Uh-hmm. Well and you're definitely the lynchpin to this whole operation here. And do I understand that you still have your landscaping business on the side and do hunting trips and whatnot?

00:52:16

KA: That's correct. That's correct. I like to do outside work, and I enjoy designing and decorating and enhancing somebody's yard or stable or whatever they need fixed, and I enjoy doing that.

00:52:31

AE: How do you do it all?

00:52:33

KA: You spend a lot of hours. It's—it's one of those things that you—you do. In the summertime, if I start at three and I get done at three and I don't have to cater a party, then I've got from three to nine [in the afternoon] to work in somebody's yard. It's still light at nine o'clock [at night] in North Carolina in the summertime, so you've got a lot of time that you can endeavor. You may endeavor for yourself, or you may endeavor for a friend, but you've still got some time that you can do things, and there's nothing wrong with being active.

00:53:05

AE: Is there anybody that can do what you do here, if you're not available?

00:53:09

KA: No, we close the doors and everybody gets to take a day off, and I get to go hunting or I go to Alaska or something, and everybody gets a break. The customers don't even have to endure this stuff when I'm not here. **[*Laughs*]**

00:53:21

AE: **[*Laughs*]** So going to Alaska and hunting is—is your break?

00:53:25

KA: It is. That's another part of my job. I have a sporting goods business, and that's just another aspect of what I do. And there again, the way we started that was for the customer. I was a guide in Idaho, and the customer was being mistreated by the outfitters, and they would be taken for a ride on half of their hunts, and I didn't think that was right. And so I started checking and looking for good outfitters that didn't do it that way—that did it the really right way and did it a really good way. And the customers are really enjoying themselves and having a fair hunt and having good dinners and enjoying themselves. When they went back, they had a good feeling about what they did, and so I started searching out outfitters that would do that, and I started eliminating outfitters that wouldn't do that and that was the driving force behind getting into that business. It was so that the customer would come away from a ten-day hunt in Alaska with a bunch of fond memories. I probably met a half-a-dozen that you'll remember for life. I've done something that not everybody gets to do and can go home and brag about it and lie about it and have a good experience.

00:54:39

AE: Well and that—while you were talking, it also reminded me that—to ask about the local community here and what your place and this restaurant has met to the locals. Because I understand from Will's [William McKinney's] video that he did a few years ago—I remember there's a group of guys who come and have coffee in the morning and sit around.

00:54:55

KA: We have a bunch of people come in and tell lies over a roundtable. There's a roundtable I found over traveling in the sporting goods business. I found that there's a roundtable in every town—that everybody has got a story, everybody has got a complaint, everybody has got to brag, and they've got to have somebody to listen and they go to a roundtable. They have coffee; they smoke cigarettes; they tell lies; they talk about what they're going to tell their wife when they get home and they never do. It's just—it's just filling station talk. And they enjoy themselves. But in—on the other hand, these are local folks that have put your community together that have made great strides and great sacrifices to put the church together, put the fire department together, to build restaurants, to have 911, to have rescue squads; they implemented all these things. We made slaw, we cooked barbecue, we—we sold mills, we developed the basic—somebody gave property away, we bought a building, we built a fire department—just all these things come together by a lot of people working together and not expecting anything back in return. And a community is always—and there is a million of these things across this country. Even in Canada, I've been to a thousand of them; there's a lot of good folks in this world and—and everywhere you go these people are endeavoring to make things better when they're gone

than it was when they got there. There might not be a lot, but it will be something. And all these people that come in here and tell these lies, they've done all that stuff.

00:56:37

AE: Well I know you're going to have to open soon, and I feel that you're going to have to check your fire soon.

00:56:41

KA: That's true.

00:56:43

AE: But—and I appreciate you standing here with me, but I just wonder if you have anything to add that I haven't asked you or maybe didn't know to ask about your business here and barbecue.

00:56:52

KA: **[*Phone Rings*]** Well, not really. I would really like to see this—this carry on. I would like to see somebody endeavor to always be the best in whatever they do. I would like to see that—that whatever you chase, whether it be barbecue or whether it be a [clay] pot, that you do your best at it. I would think that that's always going to be a place in time and a place in—in every environment that whatever you do, if you're doing it the best, somebody will recognize you, somebody will thank you for it, and somebody will appreciate it long-term.

00:57:27

AE: And you're saying—that just put up a little light bulb in my head—but you're saying that you're not a barbecue eater and you don't eat other people's barbecue. How do you know that your barbecue is so good?

00:57:35

KA: You know, I've never said that my barbecue was good. I've always said I was chasing the taste. And I'm looking for a taste like you would a bottle of wine. And I don't eat barbecue because I look at it the same way—is if I become a wino, I might not be able to taste that wine. So if I eat a taste of barbecue, my taste buds are well aware of what it's supposed to be like. They're not numb from overeating, and so I taste that barbecue everyday to achieve the taste. I don't eat other people's barbecue because their business is their business and not my business, and there's nothing I can do to change their business. And it's just like the guy told me when I bought this business, "If you think you know so much, you buy it. You do it." So if I want to do anything and I have an opinion about it, I buy it and I do it or I keep my mouth shut, and I don't stick my nose in other people's stuff. And so, you know, there's a lot of people in this state that do lots of good things, and what they're doing in their community and how it tastes and—and whatever sauce they use is very fitting because nobody can beat Grandma's cooking. And people grow up with a certain flavor, and people from this town or that town has got a hometown guy that's doing barbecue that they think is the world's best, and it ought to be that way. And I'm not trying to say that mine is better or worse than anybody else's. I'm just sticking my nose where it belongs, and that's what I do and that's all I'm going to do; so—.

00:59:16

AE: Can you describe what that taste is that you're looking for?

00:59:20

KA: Well when—after I chop the barbecue by hand and I put that sauce on it and I put that bite of meat in my mouth and my taste buds start watering and they come alive and that tang reaches out and almost brings tears to your eyes, you know, that you've gotten what you're after. Because if you don't do all—if it doesn't do all those things to you, you've missed it by a bit. And if—if you come in here and taste that barbecue right off the table, and you put it in your mouth and your taste buds doesn't just wake up and—and you're not tasting everything—all aspects about it, not just the sauce but the meat and all—it's not covered up with really hot—if you're no tasting all aspects of it, then I've missed the boat.

01:00:12

AE: Well that might be the perfect note to end on.

01:00:13

KA: Okay.

01:00:14

AE: Thank you so much.

01:00:15

KA: Hope that worked for you.

01:00:18

[End Keith Allen Interview]

