

ROSE DESHAZER WHITE
Home Cook - Chicago, IL

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Date: March 26, 2008

Location: Home/office of Elizabeth Karmel

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 55 minutes

Project: Chicago Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin Rose DeShazer White Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, March 27, 2008, for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Chicago, Illinois, at the home of Elizabeth Karmel, and I'm here with Rose White. Rose, if you would say your name and your birth date for the record, please?

00:00:17

Rose DeShazer White: Rose DeShazer White. Birth date, eleven, twenty, forty-four [November 20, 1944].

00:00:23

AE: All right. And we're here today because of your caramel [says *kar-mel*] cake—even though I say caramel [says *care-a-mel*], and you've been baking all day long. But I wonder if we could start, first, by talking about your family and your mother, who is from Mississippi—well your mother's name and where she is from in Mississippi?

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RDW: Oh, my mother's name is Willie Mae Johnson DeShazer, and she was born in Hollandale, Mississippi; and my dad is—was Ivy Lee DeShazer and he was also born in Hollandale, Mississippi.

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AE: Did your parents marry in Mississippi?

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RDW: Yes.

00:01:03

AE: And then what year did they come to Chicago?

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RDW: My father passed away in [nineteen] '46 in Mississippi, and my mother passed away in Chicago in [nineteen] '96.

00:01:17

AE: Okay, so she came to Mississippi on her own, then—I mean to Chicago? I'm sorry.

00:01:23

RDW: No, she came—well, yes. She came and stayed with me.

00:01:26

AE: Okay.

00:01:26

RDW: Live with me.

00:01:27

AE: Okay, so you came to Chicago, not your—your family?

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RDW: I came to Chicago to live with my brothers.

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AE: And what year did you come to Chicago?

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RDW: Nineteen fifty-eight.

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AE: Okay, so you were born in Hollandale?

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RDW: I was born in Hollandale, Mississippi.

00:01:51

AE: And tell me about when you brothers came up here and what they were doing when you got here.

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RDW: Two of them were in school and the others were in—were working—working jobs and they were married. And they had families.

00:02:08

AE: And so what did you do when you got here?

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RDW: I went to school. I lived with one of them, and I went to school. And I got married at eighteen. And I have one son and two—two grandchildren, one twenty-four and one ten.

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AE: What are your—your husband's name and also your son's name?

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RDW: My husband's name is Arthur White and my son is Reginald White.

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AE: Is Reginald here in Chicago?

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RDW: Yes.

00:02:40

AE: All right. So now to the cake. You learned to bake this caramel cake from your mother.

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RDW: Yes, I did.

00:02:46

AE: And tell me how she learned to make it.

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RDW: From her mother and she came to live with me, and my husband wanted something sweet; and she decided to make him a cake, and he liked the cake. And he asked her if she would show me how to—to make the cake.

00:03:08

AE: So before then—

00:03:12

RDW: You know it came from my mom's mom, from a generation back.

00:03:20

AE: And that—so that would have been your grandmother. What was her name?

00:03:23

RDW: Anna Mae Liza.

00:03:27

AE: And so before your husband wanted your mother to teach you how to make the cake, had you tried to make the caramel cake before?

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RDW: I tried but I couldn't do it, so I just kind of like threw it on the side, and so I wasn't going to bother with it anymore.

00:03:43

AE: And we—we were talking—we’ve been talking all day, so I’m going to be making you repeat yourself a little bit, but you were saying earlier that your mother really only made the cake for special occasions. Can you remember some of those occasions when you were growing up?

00:03:59

RDW: Like on Christmas, Thanksgiving, and any holidays, you know, when the family would get together or someone would like—birthdays or we had a family gathering, that’s when she would make that cake.

00:04:13

AE: Uh-hmm. And you and your mother just worked from—from memory? There’s no written down recipe for the cake?

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RDW: No, there was no—no—no recipe at all. None. *[Laughs]*

00:04:26

AE: And you said earlier that you messed up a few times and you didn’t get the—the icing right?

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RDW: I messed up a lot of times. *[Laughs]* Until I actually got it right, yeah. And now I can just almost do it with my eyes closed, you know, without a recipe.

00:04:45

AE: Do you remember about how many tries it took you to feel like you got it like your mom's?

00:04:48

RDW: Probably ten or twenty times, yeah. A lot of butter and a lot of sugar and evaporated milk—a lot of it, yeah.

00:05:00

AE: Now I assume your mother has had your cake. Does she—are they same, did she think?

00:05:07

RDW: Yes, uh-hmm. Yes.

00:05:10

AE: And you—you cook with a lot of your mom's utensils. Can you talk about those?

00:05:12

RDW: Oh, yeah. When my mother passed, she passed along her cake pans, the—the pan that she used to cook the icing in and also the spoon, so I still have it so it's from—back from—actually from her mother.

00:05:36

AE: And let's talk about those pans because there's a little different size from—from new cake pans.

00:05:41

RDW: Yes, they are. I have three that I use because I make a three-layer—three-layer cake and I think they're probably nine and a quarter or nine and three-quarters or something. They're not the average size that they use now.

00:06:00

AE: And it's kind of hard to find these—this size cake pan anymore.

00:06:03

RDW: Right, exactly. It's hard to find that size, yeah.

00:06:07

AE: And then the saucepan you use for the icing is an aluminum pan?

00:06:09

RDW: Yes, it is. It's an aluminum pan, and it's old. **[Laughs]** You look at it and you can tell it's an old pan. **[Laughs]** It's an old pan and it still cooks, though; it still makes that icing.

00:06:27

AE: And we were talking about how you've tried to use other pans but the—the aluminum is what you really like—it's the—kind of like the thinness of the aluminum?

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RDW: Yes. I tried to use something else, but it just seemed like it didn't work for me for some reason. It just didn't work, and I had to end up going back to my aluminum pan and it worked fine.

00:06:44

AE: And the magic spoon from your mother is a metal spoon.

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RDW: The magic spoon, yes. I still have that spoon, yes I do. Yeah and it works—works, too. It still works, yeah.

00:06:58

AE: And she left those things for you because she knew you wanted them?

00:07:01

RDW: Yes. Yes, because I—I guess I was the only one that really tried to—to make the cake so—and kept doing it until I got it right and that's how I got it, yeah.

00:07:13

AE: So we're in Elizabeth's kitchen and you work with Elizabeth [Karmel]. Can you tell me what you do with her?

00:07:19

RDW: Administrative work.

00:07:24

AE: How long have you been working together?

00:07:27

RDW: We've been working together for about, maybe fifteen years. Fifteen, eighteen years, yeah.

00:07:37

AE: And Elizabeth was saying earlier that when she first met you that you brought her a slice of your caramel cake?

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RDW: Yes, when we would have like birthdays I decided to—instead of me buying a cake I would make a cake and bring a cake to the person's for a birthday—. And—and I would—would bring a cake, yeah.

00:07:59

AE: Elizabeth is qualifying that and saying she got the whole cake, not just a slice. **[Laughs]** Okay, so I want to go back to the cake and you—so we're in Elizabeth's kitchen, which is why I brought Elizabeth back up again, and you brought all of these—all of this special equipment to make your cake. Have you ever not used all of those things to make a cake?

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RDW: I've tried not to use them, but it seems like that every time I try to not use them, it doesn't work out for me. And that's me, personally; it just doesn't work out for me.

00:08:31

AE: And you're using here also Elizabeth's Kitchen Aid mixer, but you said you have one of those at home.

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RDW: Yes, I do. I—I have a newer one that I—my husband got for me, yeah.

00:08:44

AE: And it makes a difference?

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RDW: It makes a difference, yes it does. It makes a difference because before, I was using a hand-mixer, so it really makes a difference, yeah. *[Laughs]*

00:08:54

AE: Does it make a difference just in—in time or do you think that it makes a better batter?

00:08:59

RDW: Both. Both, yeah. Time-wise and also a better batter, uh-hmm, yeah.

00:09:06

AE: Now do you think that you could talk us through the ingredients and the—the general recipe without looking at the recipe, because we—we’re also here because, Elizabeth—you have your caramel cake in *Saveur* magazine—“the best caramel cake in the world”—and so that’s why I’m here today. But we were—there was some discussion about the different recipes and you’ve never written it down. And so it was hard to kind of transcribe what you were doing and—and because you kind of mix it up a—every time that you do it? So can you just from memory kind of try and say what the recipe is?

00:09:44

RDW: The cake, itself, is basically a basic cake that you use, you know, three cups of flour and two cups of sugar and the baking powder and the vanilla flavor and the eggs and the milk. The onliest thing different is with the icing. With the icing is two sticks of butter and sugar and evaporated milk. So that's basically, as far as the icing is concerned—. I never really have written it down, so it's kind of like I have to kind of think about, okay, how much do I put here and how much do I put there, and so it's a little hard.

00:10:27

AE: Yeah, because you just do it automatically, and I imagine more by feel than anything.

00:10:32

RDW: Yeah, I do. I really do. And looking at it. I can just about tell how much of this and how much of that that I need, yeah.

00:10:43

AE: Well let's talk about some of the—the stuff that you put in the cake, because I know that the baking powder is a real specific brand that you use.

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RDW: Yes, for some reason I use—

00:11:06

AE: Calumet?

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RDW: Yeah, Calumet, uh-hmm. Because, to me, that's the only one that works for me. I tried other—another brand but it just wouldn't work for some reason—just for the—just for the cakes—just for the cake itself.

00:11:24

AE: And what—when you say it doesn't work, what were the other ones doing or not doing that this one does?

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RDW: It—to me it wouldn't rise and be fluffy like—like the other one would so that—that's what the problem was to me.

00:11:39

AE: And you use Swans Down cake flour.

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RDW: Swans Down cake flour. That's the only cake flour I use because, to me, it's lighter and I always sift it no matter what; I always sift it and, to me, it's the only light cake flour.

00:11:57

AE: Do you just sift it once?

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RDW: Twice. Uh-hmm, twice.

00:12:02

AE: And then let's talk about the butter. We're talking about unsalted versus salted in—in this recipe and for the cake and for the icing.

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RDW: I like salted because for one reason, you don't have to put as much—if you use unsalted, you have to put a little more salt in it than you do if you use salted butter. That's the difference with the butter, yeah.

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AE: But then you—if I remember correctly, you said you would like to use the same for both; if you have one or the other, use the same butter for the icing and the cake?

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RDW: Right, right. When I take out a—a pound of butter, when I take out for it to be room temperature and soft, I just use two sticks of the butter for the—the cake itself and two sticks for the frost—the icing. And it's both the same, whether it's salted or unsalted, either way.

00:12:54

AE: Now if you happen to have salted butter—excuse me—and you use salted butter for the icing, then if the next time you make it use you unsalted butter, do you add salt to the icing or not?

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RDW: Just—just a pinch, uh-huh. Yeah, just a pinch because the salted has salt in it already. So yeah—

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AE: And then your vanilla, what's your opinion on vanilla?

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RDW: Vanilla is the—the pure extract vanilla extract. Oh, I went to Mexico, and I purchased like a three—three pound jar or gallon of pure vanilla extract, so that's what I use, and it has to be pure. I don't use imitation any—any kind of extract—no imitation, no.

00:13:57

AE: And speaking of extracts you—sometimes you add a little extra extract of something else to your cake.

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RDW: Sometimes I put a little lemon extract in it sometimes, yeah. It gives it a little bit of different—little different flavor.

00:14:10

AE: So you chose not to do that today. Can you say why?

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RDW: I chose not to do it today because it really wasn't on the—in the recipe so I decided not to add it.

00:14:20

AE: And that decision just comes with your mood or whatever you—if you have it handy?

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RDW: Yeah, if I have it handy, or if I feel like I want to add it, I add it; and if I'm home, I add it and if not, I will just, you know, leave it out, yeah.

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AE: Do most of the people who eat your cakes, can they tell if that's in there or not?

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RDW: Some do and some don't, yeah. Some do and some don't, yeah.

00:14:43

AE: Is there any body who's asked you to add it?

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RDW: No.

00:14:45

AE: No?

00:14:46

RDW: No. No, but sometimes they'll say, "Oh, something little different about this" or something like that, but other than that, that's about it.

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AE: About how much would you add, if you were adding that to the cake?

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RDW: About a—a quarter of a teaspoon, uh-hmm. Yeah.

00:15:05

AE: And so then I guess we'll move on to the—well, I'll stop and ask again about the cakes because when you're baking them at 350 [degrees], what were they in there for, about twenty minutes?

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RDW: Probably about twenty to thirty minutes, maybe, uh-hmm.

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AE: And you—you didn't turn the timer on for the cakes. You just know when they're done, but you checked them a little bit and kept touching them. Can you talk about that?

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RDW: I can tell when they're done by touching—touching the center of them and that's usually how I could tell. I'm not used to using a timer or anything with my cakes. So I don't know.

00:15:45

AE: What do they feel like when they're done?

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RDW: They kind of like bounce—bounce in the—in the center, yeah, like fluffy like, yeah.

00:15:54

AE: And so when you put the cakes in the over earlier, you went straight to starting the icing because it takes—it takes a long while. Can you talk about that process?

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RDW: Yes, it does take a while for the sugar and the butter to get brown and to—and for once you—once the sugar and the butter browns, you put the evaporated milk in it, and it takes a while for it to get fixed. So it takes a while, probably a couple hours or more, yeah.

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AE: So tell me about what you were saying about that ratio of sugar to butter and how you can mess that up.

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RDW: If you don't put the right amount of sugar, the right amount of butter and the right amount of milk, it will not come out smooth. The icing will not come out smooth; it will come out lumpy. And it will also come out clabbered like buttermilk, so it has to be the right amount of each one of them; otherwise, it will not turn out right.

00:17:02

AE: And you use—it might not be the right amount here but two sticks of butter and then how much sugar to two sticks?

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RDW: I think it was four and—four and a half, I think it was—four and a half that we measured out earlier—four and a half.

00:17:22

AE: Was the same now—

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RDW: Four and a quarter.

00:17:27

AE: Four and a quarter. Okay, two and a half pounds of sugar, four and a quarter cups, okay.

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RDW: See, I'm not used to that—see, I'm not used to that you know. I'm used to, well, just pouring it, so I'm not used to these measurements.

00:17:41

AE: And so you're—you're mixing the butter and sugar together on high heat [on the stovetop] and then it—can you describe at what point you decide to add the milk—what it looks like and what the consistency is?

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RDW: Okay, once it started getting brown, it depends on whether you want dark caramel or light caramel. If you want light caramel, you don't let it get too brown—the sugar and the butter,

you don't let it get too brown before you pour the evaporated milk in there. If you want a darker caramel—because the more—the longer that you let it get brown, once you put the milk in there, it's going to get even darker when it gets thicker. So it depends on the individual how—what color they want, as far as the caramel is concerned.

00:18:28

AE: And that's the commitment that is made pretty early on, as far as the color?

00:18:33

RDW: Yes, yes.

00:18:34

AE: And you don't seem to really have an opinion on color. You change it up a little bit?

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RDW: I do, I do. Sometimes I do light, and sometimes I do dark. It just depends on how I feel at the time because this is really my—I call it my therapy [*Laughs*]*—*making caramel cakes, you know, it's kind of like my therapy. So it's kind of like I sometimes may experiment on it, and sometimes I don't, you know.

00:18:58

AE: And when you decide to do a different color for the caramel icing, is it something that's as much about taste as it is looks, or does one outweigh the other?

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RDW: I kind of go with a little of both. I kind of go with a little of both. Taste—taste is important, yeah.

00:19:22

AE: Is it a considerably different taste, if it's a lot darker?

00:19:27

RDW: I don't think so. I don't really think so, but I guess I've—I've seen at different restaurants or stores that sometimes they have darker caramel than they do, and then sometimes they have lighter caramel, so I guess I kind of like experiment on my own. But I—I really don't think that there is a real big difference; I really don't.

00:19:51

AE: Uh-hmm. Now are the people that you make cakes for who like it a certain color—?

00:19:57

RDW: No, uh-um. They just want caramel cake.

00:20:00

AE: Nah? They just want your caramel cake.

00:20:02

RDW: *[Laughs]* Yeah, well my caramel cake—yeah. No they don't—no, no it just, you know, they say, "Okay, I want you to make me a caramel cake."

00:20:17

AE: And you—and you said that you have sometimes—you’re talking about how baking is your therapy and making these cakes and standing at the stove. Sometimes you’ve made three cakes right in a row.

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RDW: Oh yeah, I’ve did that a lot of times, you know. I’ll take one and one batter and put it in the stove and then start a new one and then, in the meantime, I will start with the—the icing, so I—I can do that, you know. I can be in the kitchen all day with just making cakes so—.

00:20:46

AE: And you don’t like to eat them?

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RDW: I don’t particularly like to eat them. *[Laughs]*

00:20:53

AE: Neither does your husband?

00:20:53

RDW: Neither does—my husband says the icing is too sweet for him now, you know. He used to love them, but now he’s saying it’s too sweet for him all of the sudden, so maybe it’s the age, who knows. I don’t know.

00:21:06

AE: But your husband does like to have some of the trimmings when you trim the cake up?

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RDW: Oh yeah, he likes the trimmings. And he always will tell me, “Save me the trimmings,” uh-hmm. So I usually put them in a bag for him and—sealed in a plastic bag for him.

00:21:18

AE: So back to the—the icing. We were standing over there at the stove for, you know, two hours just babysitting it. Can you talk about what you’re doing and—and how it’s changing while you’re working with it?

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RDW: Okay. As you stir it, it’s getting thicker, but sometimes I like turn the—turn the—the stove up on it to high sometimes and stir it real fast, and that makes it get thicker quicker. And then when you turn it down low, then it will get thick, but you don’t have to watch it—stand there and watch it the whole time. But you have to continuously to stir it, so it won’t burn at the bottom—it don’t scorch at the bottom because it—it will scorch easily and before you know it, it has—it’s—it’s scorched at the bottom.

00:22:05

AE: Uh-huh. And it can boil up pretty easily, too.

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RDW: And it can boil up yes. Yes, it can boil up really quick. You can go to one thing and come back and look at it, and it’s all the way up to the tip [of the pot], yeah.

00:22:17

AE: And you—you were letting me stir it for a minute there, and it started boiling up on me and I was getting nervous, but you said you have a little trick to stir it real fast.

00:22:23

RDW: Yeah, you stir it real fast and then dip it and dip it and dip it, and then stir it real fast and dip it and dip it, and that will get it down, yeah.

00:22:33

AE: And you have all this molten sugar and butter and everything, and I was asking you earlier if you've ever burned yourself making the—the caramel.

00:22:42

RDW: Yeah, uh-hmm, yeah, I did it a few times. **[Laughs]** Yeah, I have, you know, my arm, you know, especially the one that I do—you know, I'm right-handed, so I'm stirring and so yeah, it like bubbles up and pops up so, yeah.

00:22:55

AE: And so if you had to describe the color today when you stopped cooking the icing, what would you call that color of caramel?

00:23:04

RDW: Maybe a reddish brownish-type color, yeah. Uh-hmm. Because it can get darker than that, and it can get lighter than that because I've did some that, once I first start putting the sugar and the butter in there and I just go around for a little—let it brown for a little bit and then I put

the—the evaporated milk in there that’s a really light color. But once it’s cooked, it’s going to get darker, so sometimes I do that.

00:23:46

AE: And you said sometimes, too, you don’t put all of the two cans of evaporated milk in.

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RDW: Right. Sometimes I don’t put all of the evaporated milk in there because sometimes, if you don’t have enough sugar or you don’t have enough butter or you—or you have too much butter then it will—it won’t act right. It will—it will just clabber up on your.

00:24:10

AE: Can you describe when you get that feeling for what it needs or you need to kind of ease up on what—what consistency and look you’re going for?

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RDW: When I’m stirring and I can look at it and tell if the butter is—it has butter around the ring at the bottom, that means that you don’t have enough sugar in it, so that I can tell. But if you put too much cream in it, and I usually—the second can, I kind of like slowly put it in there so I’ll know because it’ll—it’ll tell—it’ll let you know because it’s going to start clabbering up if it’s too much—too much evaporated milk.

00:24:56

AE: Okay. And so what—what is special about evaporated milk that you use that instead of milk or—or regular milk?

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RDW: Well I don't know; I got that from my mom. I've never used anything else. And she—evidently, she's never used anything else because that's all I know.

00:25:16

AE: Would you say it has anything to do with that it's canned, and that it's easier to keep and have around than fresh milk?

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RDW: Well it's easier to keep because it's in the can, yeah. But I've never used fresh milk to do that.

00:25:31

AE: Do you think you'll ever try or stay with—stay with the standard?

00:25:35

RDW: I think I'll have to stay with my standard. *[Laughs]* I don't know too many people that still do what I do with my cakes, so I don't know too many people that still do that, so I probably will stick with it, uh-hmm.

00:25:46

AE: Well speaking of changing it up, I just—I happened to ask you while you were cooking if you had heard of anybody who used caramel candies to make their icing, and you had heard about that in passing somewhere.

00:25:56

RDW: Yes, I did. I—I—but I—I heard somebody said that they just used caramel, you know, and just put some—some other type of milk it and oh, they got caramel to put on the—you know, something like that. But I didn't really pay that much attention to it because I—you know—.

00:26:20

AE: Because you do what you do?

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RDW: Because I do what I—because I do what I do, right. *[Laughs]* Because I do what I do. Because I knew I wasn't going to do that, so I didn't really—it didn't really stick in my brain, yeah.

00:26:32

AE: And have you tasted other people's caramel cakes over the years?

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RDW: Yes, yes I have. I have and I can pretty much tell the difference in my—of course, mine than someone else's but yeah, I have.

00:26:45

AE: And when you're making cakes and you make them for, you know, family events and birthdays and things but people come to you and—and request cakes to be made for—for other things—.

00:26:55

RDW: Yes. Yes, usually, if I'm making it for some type of function or something like that—that's going on in my family. It might be some friends or somebody that's over there, and they'll ask me to make one for their birthday or something that they're having, and they say, "Oh, I'll pay you." And then, "How much do you charge?" And that's it.

00:27:23

AE: And tell us what you charge for a cake?

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RDW: Forty-five dollars for a cake, yeah. Yeah, \$45.00.

00:27:30

AE: Does anybody ever order more than one at one time?

00:27:36

RDW: Yeah, I've had someone order like three at one time. That's the most, uh-hmm.

00:27:41

AE: And would you go ahead and make those in one day, like you were talking about earlier, or would you spread that out, if you could.

00:27:47

RDW: Oh no, I made those in one day, yeah. If, you know, it's for one person, I make them all in one day because I make all the—I make all the cakes and I make all the icing, and I just divide all the—the icing among the three cakes and all of that, so they'll look the same. Because when you do your icing, if you do two or three different batches, it may not come out the same color. So if you're doing it for one person—so you just try to—if you're doing three cakes, you try to do all those three cakes and make sure that every—all of them are the same.

00:28:24

AE: So you'll do like a thin layer with one batch of icing on all three cakes and then layer it up as you go?

00:28:29

RDW: Yes. Yes, I start out with a thin layer on all the three cakes for the three layers and then at the end, then they'll all get the same going around—around the cake and on the top.

00:28:44

AE: And we were talking about the—the icing that goes between the layers that some people like more icing in the middle.

00:28:48

RDW: Oh yeah, yeah. If I bake one, like my old job where I was, I baked one and she—and the young lady told me she wanted extra icing on it, and so I did. I put extra, extra, extra, yeah.

00:29:05

AE: So to do extra icing would you just add more ingredients to one batch of icing, or would you make two batches?

00:29:13

RDW: No, actually with the two sticks of butter you can—you can do extra icing. Actually you can do extra icing.

00:29:23

AE: So you'll have a little bit anyway?

00:29:25

RDW: You'll have a little—yeah you'll have a little bit extra, right.

00:29:28

AE: And you told me earlier you've got a—a thing of icing in your refrigerator at home right now.

00:29:33

RDW: Yes, I probably have a couple of little plastic cups with some in there [*Laughs*] that sometimes I—what I do is I use it—I use it when I'm baking another cake, and I just add that to the one that I already have.

00:29:51

AE: And you have some cakes in your freezer, too.

00:29:54

RDW: Yes, I do. I do. I have cakes—put cakes in my freezer. Sometimes I’ve put them in there whole, and sometimes I’ve put them in there sliced up. And I what I do is I take aluminum foil and once the cake gets cold, I take aluminum foil and wrap it around it and put it in a—a baggie and put it in the freezer. And if I slice it up, I slice it up with—with cellophane and put cellophane on each slice and then I put them in the baggie and put them in the freezer.

00:30:29

AE: And so you always keep some cake at the house for when people come over?

00:30:32

RDW: Yeah, most of the time I have some. Most of the time they come and ask me, “You got cake in the freezer?” Yeah, so yeah most of the time I have—.

00:30:42

AE: So when you take the—the cakes out of the oven and you pat them down to make sure that they’re feeling right and they cool off and then you trim them, can you talk about trimming them?

00:30:52

RDW: Oh, yeah. Sometimes—I trim them because sometimes, if they’re not even, I either cut the one side off and then to try to—to make it even, you know, when you put the cake on—when it’s layered to put it on the layers, and also I trim it around the side because of the excess cake that’s—that’s on there and the flour and stuff that’s built up. And sometimes there’s—it’s kind of a little hard and chippy, so I kind of like make it kind of smooth around the edges.

00:31:27

AE: And that reminds me to mention Baker's Joy, that you spray your pans with that—that flour-oil mixture.

00:31:35

RDW: Yes, I do. I like that because I used to do butter and flour, and this is so much easier.

[Laughs] It's so much easier, yes.

00:31:45

AE: And also, when you take your cakes out of the oven you said you like to—when you put them on the cooling rack, you like to put them right side up.

00:31:53

RDW: Yes. What I do is a lot of times I just flip it over in my hand, and then I turn it back over onto a cooling rack.

00:32:02

AE: Uh-hmm. And why do you like to do it that way?

00:32:05

RDW: Because I get a feel of the cake of how the cake feels, and I like that. It just—I just have—I know—I just kind of like the feel of it.

00:32:17

AE: Now we've gotten to the point here where you've put one layer on the cake plate and started icing it, but the icing was still a little too warm for you to work with, so we stopped so we could talk, but when you're—I saw you eying the cakes, trying—it looked like you were trying to decide which one you were going to put on the bottom.

00:32:32

RDW: *[Laughs]* Yes, I was. I didn't think you—I didn't think you were noticing that, but yes.

[Laughs] Yes, I was trying to decide which one, and the reason why I wanted to do that is because I was trying to see the sizes of the cake and if there's a smaller size than the other two—it's three layers. If it's a smaller size than the other two, I would put the smaller size in the—in the center. And if it's—the larger piece I would put at the bottom because I didn't want to put the heavier piece on the top to weigh it down or to make it slide or anything like that.

00:33:11

AE: A little engineering involved.

00:33:15

RDW: Yeah, that's my own little thing, you know, that I do.

00:33:19

AE: Now do you ever trim the top off of a cake to make it more level?

00:33:23

RDW: I trim the top off when it's—if I put two cakes on a rack at the same time in the oven and sometimes they're—they lean and they—one side will come up and the other side is down, and it

cooks more on one side than the other side, so I—in order—I level it off; I cut the top off in order to level it off for the cake, so it can fit without sliding and—and be, you know, one side—.

00:33:53

AE: And when you cook these today you had two pretty much on the center rack and one below, and you took the two out earlier than the one below and then put that up on the higher rack to finish.

00:34:04

RDW: Because the one at the bottom had not completely—wasn't completely done. And I could look at that one and tell it wasn't completely done.

00:34:15

AE: And you said you've only ever baked these cakes using a gas stove.

00:34:18

RDW: Yes. Yes, only gas stoves, never tried it on an electric stove.

00:34:27

AE: And so—

00:34:28

RDW: Or a wood stove.

00:34:30

AE: Or a wood stove. I bet you're glad of that. *[Laughs]*

00:34:33

RDW: Yes, yes, yes. *[Laughs]*

00:34:36

AE: Did your mom make hers on a wood stove?

00:34:39

RDW: Yeah, yeah. Uh-huh yeah, in Mississippi—yeah.

00:34:45

AE: Do you remember her commenting over the years about how ingredients changed and technology changed and hand-mixers and all that kind of stuff that makes baking different?

00:34:51

RDW: Oh, yeah. She’s—she used to do it by hand. I mean she—she mixed the cake by hand. Yeah, my mother did—all of her cakes, she mixed by hand because actually, when she came to Chicago to live with me, she was still doing that. I said, “No, mother, we can't do that anymore.” *[Laughs]*.

00:35:12

AE: Did she like your mixer?

00:35:14

RDW: I had a hand mixer at the time, yeah. So, yeah, it was a little different, but she finally got used to it, yeah.

00:35:22

AE: And so tell me about icing the cake and how—how you go about doing that. I just saw you do that one layer, so far.

00:35:32

RDW: I used—let's see, what I usually do is I usually layer—put icing on the first layer and then I also go around the—the cake, the sides of it too. And a lot of people don't do that, but I do that sometimes. And so the next layer, I may do it; I may not do it. It depends on how the cake is—is sitting, you know. I kind of like try to—I guess it's the art or craft with me that I'm kind of like, okay, let me see what's—what's happening here with this cake and that's—and I may not do it always the same way.

00:36:20

AE: So it has a lot to do with how the cake is sitting and kind of the weight of the cake and how it's acting and then also the consistency of the icing, so it doesn't slide off.

00:36:30

RDW: Right. It has to be if it—if it's the icing is still warm, it will slide off—definitely. Uh-hmm, definitely.

00:36:41

AE: And then, as you're working it—what's that? Oh, yeah. No, I was going to ask you about that—I was. She's asking me about toothpicks. I was going to ask you that. But first, like when

you're—when you're working with the icing and it's—is it setting up while it's on the cake—because it seemed like you got it really thick on that first layer?

00:37:03

RDW: Yeah, it's—it's—you're right, it is. It's setting, but I wanted to—actually, what I was doing was trying to see how it was going to react to me, yeah, basically, yeah.

00:37:23

AE: So you're laughing about the toothpicks. The reason that that came up is because I was saying earlier that icing is frustrating for me because I'm always too impatient to let the cakes cool enough to put the icing on, but you say you have a little trick for that.

00:37:36

RDW: Oh, yeah. I said I just stick some toothpicks around it and just—just ice it and stick some toothpicks around it and put it in the refrigerator for about thirty minutes, take it back out, pull out the toothpicks and finish icing it.

00:37:52

AE: Uh-hmm. And so when you—when you say you ice it, you put icing between the layers so the cake sticks to itself and then put the toothpicks in?

00:38:01

RDW: Right, right. It won't slide because the icing is hot, so it won't slide, yeah.

00:38:07

AE: And you were working pretty fast in there earlier, and I didn't get a chance to see. Do you put a little dollop of icing on the cake plate before you put the first layer down?

00:38:15

RDW: No, uh-um, no. That was another reason why I wanted to make sure that that bottom layer—I wanted it to look smooth and brown. And because once you slice it and you turn it over, you're going to see that last layer of cake.

00:38:38

AE: You want it to look perfect.

00:38:40

RDW: You want it to look pretty—really pretty, yeah.

00:38:44

AE: And so tell me about icing. When you've got all three layers together and you're doing that—that final run of your knife, tell me what you're looking for when you're finishing off the cake.

00:38:55

RDW: Looking at how I can—what I can do to make it look nice and make it look pretty.

00:39:02

AE: And does pretty to you—is that like as smooth as glass as you can get it, or do you like to have some knife marks in it?

00:39:08

RDW: I like smooth; I like smooth. That's me. I like smooth, yeah, because I wanted to make sure that it's smooth all the way around and then on the top smooth—a smooth top, uh-hmm.

00:39:27

AE: And I'm going to see here not too long from now how perfectionist you are about that getting it all glassy like, and I imagine so. You're pretty—pretty much a stickler for how that looks.

00:39:36

RDW: Yeah, I—I am, I really am. *[Laughs]* And I'll say in a minute that that's not right. Just kind of like okay this is not right, but that's me. I'm hard on myself sometimes.

00:39:52

AE: Well you invest so much time and money in ingredients in doing something, you want it to come out right.

00:39:56

RDW: Yeah, that's true. That's true. And like I say, it's just kind of like therapy for me. And it's not a big deal.

00:40:05

AE: Do you ever—because when I ice cakes I can—I could do it all day and I feel like it could never be finished icing, because there's always something else you could do or another place you

could touch. Do you ever kind of fiddle with that or, you know, enjoy icing as much as you like making the icing?

00:40:20

RDW: Hmm, no. You know I can fool with it a little bit after the end, you know, it's—what's done is done, yeah.

00:40:30

AE: And what about serving it? When you slice into a cake, tell me about what you like seeing on the inside.

00:40:37

RDW: I like to see how much icing I've put in between each layer and how it looks on the inside. Yeah. If it's still soft. And I'm stickly about softness. Softness, fluffiness—that's what I'm about.

00:41:00

AE: Now do you have—do you like to have, when you slice the cake, the same kind of thickness of icing in the middle as you have on the sides? Is that important to you?

00:41:07

RDW: Not necessarily, no. I think it's more on the outside than—than the inside because, usually, that's what I do more outside than I do—unless someone specifically says, "I want more icing." And then I will just like layer the—I mean really put a lot of icing in between each layer.

00:41:31

AE: So tell me what the people say about your cakes.

00:41:33

RDW: They love them. That's all I can say. They say they like them.

00:41:41

AE: Can you describe what it tastes like? I mean people who have had caramel cake can describe caramel cake but what—what you think is special about how yours tastes?

00:41:51

RDW: What I think is special about it. I think it's special because I—I learned—I learned it from my mom. That's what's special about it. Um-hmm. And she's not here to do it anymore, so I'm just carrying on the legacy until maybe my granddaughter—since I don't have a daughter, maybe my granddaughter will do this someday.

00:42:23

AE: Does your daughter-in-law bake? Would she bake the caramel cake?

00:42:29

RDW: No, she doesn't bake because she asks me all the time to bake it. So—. **[Laughs]**

00:42:34

AE: **[Laughs]**

00:42:34

RDW: No, she doesn't make it. No. *[Laughs]*

00:42:39

AE: So when you, you know, Elizabeth worked with you to help write down your recipe, and it appeared in *Saveur* magazine how did that make you feel? *[Rose's caramel cake was featured on page 78 of the October 2007 issue of Saveur magazine.]*

00:42:49

RDW: It was nice. It was really nice that someone would even, you know, think to even put it in a magazine, and so it was nice.

00:43:01

AE: Well what do you think your mom would say about your family cake being in the magazine?

00:43:05

RDW: Oh, she would be so surprised, and she would be so shocked and so glad and so happy and some of everything, I'm sure. I'm sure she would say that, "Oh, you finally got it. *[Laughs]* You finally learned how to make it, for real. Somebody seen that you know how to make a caramel cake."

00:43:28

AE: And we were talking earlier about how people don't really cook at home and, you know, especially something like caramel cake; it takes a lot of time and attention. What do you think

about that, and do you think that this recipe will—will stick around and people will continue taking the time to make this cake?

00:43:45

RDW: People don't—younger generation, they really don't take the time to learn old recipes from their mother, their grandmother or whomever; but it's a good thing that, you know, some people should just keep the legacy going, you know, in the family and—but it would be nice. It really would be nice, yeah.

00:44:14

AE: Now if you didn't, you know, write down this recipe to be included in this magazine, do you think you would have tried to write it down yourself so that you could pass it onto your family?

00:44:23

RDW: No. No, I wouldn't even have thought about to write it down. I really wouldn't. My nieces and my sister-in-laws, they've—I've, you know, told them over the phone how to make it, but they could never get it right. So but if Elizabeth hadn't have asked me about it, and we wrote it down together, I probably would have never wrote it down because I was just so used to just going in my kitchen and doing it and—and thinking nothing of it, yeah.

00:45:00

AE: Taking it for granted because you've always known.

00:45:03

RDW: Yeah. I've—I've pretty much, you know—I've known for years and years, so it was kind of like, oh well.

00:45:15

AE: So is your family getting a copy of the recipe that you've typed up?

00:45:20

RDW: I sent them the magazine that—the article in the magazine, yeah.

00:45:29

AE: I mean we're talking, and I don't want to get *Saveur* in trouble or anything, but with the picture of this cake that's in the magazine they made, and it's only two layers—.

00:45:36

RDW: Yes, and I always do three layers—always do three layers. I've never made a two-layer for some reason and—I guess because I got the three cake pans, and I've always made three layers, so I've never made two layers. And I know some people that ask me to make cakes, they'd be surprised to see my cake has three layers because you don't see a three-layer cake hardly anymore so that—that's surprising. “Oh, it's three layers?”

00:46:19

AE: And it—it looks a lot different for one, but you get more icing on a three-layer cake.

00:46:20

RDW: Yes, you do. You really do get more icing [*Laughs*] on the three-layer cake. You really do. And that's why when I make the—with the two sticks of butter and—and the sugar it makes, if you really want to stretch it, you probably could do two three-layer cakes with it. But usually I don't try to make—unless I'm making three and then I make another batch, and I kind of thin it out so I can have enough for three three-layers. But I usually try to make enough.

00:47:04

AE: Are there any other cakes that you like to bake at home?

00:47:09

RDW: Every once in a while I'll make a pound cake. That's—that's about it. Because when I make a pound cake, they don't eat the pound cake. They eat all the caramel, "You got anymore caramel cake?" So it's—it's—sometimes it's just a waste of my time to do the pound cake or some other cake. Every once in a while I do a chocolate cake; every once in a while I do a white, you know, cake or a yellow cake or something, but they won't eat it, yeah, so—for some reason.

00:47:39

AE: Why?

00:47:39

RDW: I don't know why.

00:47:42

AE: Hmm. They must appreciate all the trouble you go to to make it.

00:47:45

RDW: Yeah, I guess so. I guess so. [*Laughs*]

00:47:48

AE: And I want to ask you about your cornbread because you mentioned it earlier when we were talking about baking powder. Can you tell me how you make your cornbread?

00:47:57

RDW: [*Laughs*] Oh, cornbread. Okay, I use—I use cornmeal; sometimes I use the white—I mix the white and the yellow together. And I use, you know, baking powder, milk—sometimes I use buttermilk, sometimes I use white milk—and then I put—and I’m not sure whether—anyway, I’ll say it. I use a skillet—a black skillet and I put some oil in the skillet, and I put it in the oven and then I take it out, and I put it in the cornbread and mix it in the cornbread before I put the—before I put the mixture in there in the—in the skillet.

00:49:03

AE: So you mix—you put the oil in the skillet and heat it up, and then you put the oil in the cornbread?

00:49:08

RDW: Uh-hmm, yes. Wes, uh-huh. Because I use—you know, I use maybe—I’ll have—I don’t measure, so maybe a half-teaspoon or something but enough to go into the cornbread, and I mix it up, yeah.

00:49:21

AE: And no sugar in your cornbread?

00:49:24

RDW: Sometimes I do; sometimes I don't. Because my husband likes it sometimes, and sometimes I do, and I might put a tablespoon or teaspoon or tablespoon or something. But if I really want that down South cornbread, I don't put any in there, like my mother used to make it.

[Laughs] Oh, you don't put—anyway, uh-hmm, yeah.

00:49:48

AE: Is there anything else that you make that you learned from your mother that—that you'd like to mention?

00:49:54

RDW: She used to make butter rolls all the time. But I loved her butter rolls. **[Laughs]** But that's—that's about it.

00:50:07

AE: Yeah? By butter roll do you mean like a yeast roll or—?

00:50:11

RDW: Yeah, it's—it's—it was made out of dough, flour and—but you didn't put any baking powder or anything in it, but it's a lot of butter because she—she wrapped it in butter and it was like a pound of butter. It was just like butter—butter, yeah, so—and cinnamon, nutmeg, and vanilla flavor and that was pretty much it—yeah. And she put it in the oven and baked it, and it come out like soft and juicy, you know, when you—when you take it out of the oven, uh-hmm.

00:51:01

AE: And before your mother came up to live with you, did you make a lot of trips back to Hollandale over the years?

00:51:05

RDW: Not that often. Uh-um, not that often because I've been here since I was twelve.

00:51:13

AE: What did she think about her children coming up to the big city?

00:51:17

RDW: Well, due to the circumstances of my father passed away, so a lot of us—because there was ten of us—there was ten of us and so—and I am the second one from the bottom and *[Laughs]* so—and nine of us are still living and so it was—my mom couldn't take care of us, so we just kind of like came and lived with our older, you know—the younger ones came and lived with the older ones, if they were married or whatever.

00:52:00

AE: So did all ten of you, at some point over the years, end up in Chicago?

00:52:05

RDW: No, my—my younger sister is in Houston, and she's the only one that's in Houston, and the—all the boys are here in Chicago, and then I have the two sisters that's in Detroit, so that's the nine that's still living.

00:52:27

AE: Doesn't—you came here so young, and there are so many other Mississippians who came to Chicago during the Great Migration and—and—over the years and we were talking about James Lemons over there at Lem's Bar-B-Q earlier from Mississippi and was there—did you make connections with people from Mississippi when you were up here?

00:52:43

RDW: No, not necessarily. Uh-um, no. We—I had a lot of family here, so it was—basically, you know, you went from one family's house to another family's house and they was living in—living in different parts of the city, so you would go all over the city just visiting relatives, yeah.

00:53:02

AE: And there's—there's a lot of soul food in Chicago and a lot of barbecue in Chicago and a lot of cakes in Chicago.

00:53:09

RDW: You're absolutely right. A lot of cakes. That's why I was kind of like surprised about this because it's so many cakes out there, so many barbecues; there's so many restaurants, there's so many soul foods—everything that's here in the city of Chicago, you know.

00:53:26

AE: And you said—I think I remember asking you about pie earlier, and you make a pie occasionally.

00:53:31

RDW: Yeah, I make a pie occasionally. A peach cobbler sometimes. Sometimes I do a lemon pie. And every now and then I do that, uh-hmm. But I—the reason why I don't do it on a regular basis is because my family won't eat it—won't eat it. So I end up having it sitting at the house or something so—.

00:53:58

AE: Well it seems—I mean there's—there's cake in Mississippi, too, of course, but it seems like there's more pie in the South and more cake up here. Am I imaging that? It seems like a real cake heavy town?

00:54:08

RDW: Yeah, I think so, too. I really do. I think so, too, yeah. Yeah, a lot of people eat cake, yeah.

00:54:15

AE: Any way to explain that?

00:54:17

RDW: No. No, I don't—I don't have any idea. No.

00:54:24

AE: Yeah?

00:54:24

RDW: I really don't. *[Laughs]*

00:54:26

AE: Well I'll tell you, it doesn't bother me for—for a bit. **[Laughs]** Unless you have—do you have something else to say or a final thought or something? Because I think you have the rest of that cake in there to ice.

00:54:40

RDW: I was going to say I need to go and finish this cake. Yeah, that's about it. **[Laughs]**
Yeah, I'm fine.

00:54:46

AE: Well Rose, thank you so much for this whole day, and especially for sitting here talking with me. I appreciate it.

00:54:50

RDW: Thank you.

00:54:51

[End Rose DeShazer White Interview]