

**DAMON LEE FOWLER**  
**Savannah, GA**

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Date: March 8, 2005  
Location: WSVH Radio Studio – Savannah, GA  
Interviewer: Orlando Montoya  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 30 minutes  
Project: SFA Founders

**[Begin Damon Lee Fowler-Part One Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Orlando Montoya:** Okay. Can I first of all get you to state your name and what day it is and what you do?

**00:00:11**

**Damon Lee Fowler:** What day is it?

**00:00:13**

**OM:** Today is the—March 18<sup>th</sup>; I just—I’ll just state it right on tape. No, March 7<sup>th</sup> actually—  
March 7<sup>th</sup>.

**00:00:19**

**DLF:** March the 7<sup>th</sup> okay.

**00:00:21**

**OM:** No; it is Tuesday, March 8<sup>th</sup> looking at the calendar, looking at the calendar, Tuesday, March 8, 2005 and we’re talking with Damon Lee Fowler, food writer here. Where were you born?

**00:00:28**

**DLF:** I was born in Newnan, Georgia and raised in South Carolina. My father was a Baptist Minister, so we—we moved to South Carolina when I was nine months old. And so my stomping ground was the foothills of the Carolinas.

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**OM:** Uh-hm; and what was your earliest memory of food?

**00:00:52**

**DLF:** Oh goodness. My very earliest memories of food are sort of all jumbled together, my grandmother and my mother sort of together. My mother says I made my first omelet when I was four years old—that I backed a kitchen chair up to the stove and climbed onto it and made an omelet and so was proud of myself at four years old.

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My first real distinct memories are of making cakes with my grandmother.

**00:01:19**

**OM:** Uh-hmm, and would those cakes be made for like a special occasion or just for Sunday dinner maybe?

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**DLF:** No, she tended to make those for Circle Meetings, which is a Baptist thing that's a women's mission organization. They get together to—to do Bible studies and things like that and they called them Circles. I don't know if they still call them that or not but she made them for

those kinds of things. If somebody was sick or somebody died or somebody was happy or somebody was sad, you made them a cake and you took it to them.

**00:01:48**

So, I think we ate very few of those cakes actually; I think most of them went out of the house.

**00:01:56**

**OM:** And when you were little and growing up and you sat around the table was there sitting around the table with your mom and dad like that or—or was it not like that?

**00:02:10**

**DLF:** It was not like that. We didn't linger over food. We didn't spend our time thinking about it. We did talk about food a lot and I remember especially when I got older talking about food a lot with my mother. When I first started working on *Classical Southern Cooking* which was my first cookbook my mother and I spent a lot of time remembering the food from our childhoods, and then my grandmother, too, remembering the food from her childhood as well and the times that we spent together.

**00:02:45**

**OM:** What were some of those foods?

**00:02:47**

**DLF:** Biscuits of course, fried chicken; my grandmothers both made wonderful fried chicken but very different from one another. One grandmother, my paternal grandmother used to brine

her chicken and then pan-fry it and she would half-steam it about halfway through. She'd spoon off most of the fat and put water in it and then put a lid on and let it steam and then she'd take the lid off and crisp it up again before it was finished.

**00:03:18**

My maternal grandmother used to soak it in buttermilk and then pan-fry it and she did not steam it and thought that was very strange.

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**OM:** And today you—?

**00:03:27**

**DLF:** I do kind of a bastard modification of both. *[Laughs]* I usually brine it. Then I soak it in buttermilk and I generally don't steam it because that's a little bit tricky for me to do.

**00:03:42**

**OM:** So when you were watching your mother and your grandmothers make all of these recipes did it interest you at all more than you know this is what's for dinner? Did you have any interest at all in it in cooking?

**00:03:58**

**DLF:** I think unfortunately when I—I loved cooking and I was fascinated by cooking and—and from—. I don't remember a time when I didn't love it. But I was less interested in the food that we had every day than I was in finding out about foods from other places, Italian food, French

cooking I was fascinated by. Anything that was outside of our sphere I was fascinated by and interested in.

**00:04:27**

**OM:** Why do you think that was?

**00:04:29**

**DLF:** I think we just sort of took for granted the food that we had. I've been working for the last eight or nine years on a novel and in the novel the protagonist is from Savannah and he goes to Italy to Genoa, Italy and spends a little bit of time there and it's only when he's exposed to the cooking of Italy which is—is similar to but very different from the food of his childhood here in Savannah that he really begins to appreciate the cuisine from his childhood.

**00:05:04**

And he suddenly realizes they had quite good food when he was growing up but he never really thought about it. I think we all tend to do that a little bit except for Italians.

**00:05:10**

**OM:** Do you remember going to Italian restaurants and Greek restaurants in—?

**00:05:14**

**DLF:** Oh my goodness, they didn't exist. Well—well they did exist. Usually the Italian restaurants were owned by Greeks [*Laughs*] and the food was about as Italian as I am, but it was lots and lots of red sauce and garlic bread that was steamed rather than toasted and so it was very different and it wasn't really authentic Italian food or authentic Greek food for that matter.

**00:05:39**

But we didn't eat out a lot; we couldn't afford it.

**00:05:44**

**OM:** Uh-hmm, would you say that you grew up on the middle-class or lower middle-class and that—did that affect the way you viewed food at all? Did you have—a lot of people—a lot of—the reason I ask that is a lot of—a lot of people tend to—who maybe remember growing up in the Depression hoarded food a lot.

**00:06:04**

**DLF:** Yeah.

**00:06:06**

**OM:** Or they didn't throw away scraps. Everything was saved.

**00:06:08**

**DLF:** Everything was used and both my parents of course were children of the Depression. My father was born just before the Depression began and my mother was born right solidly in the middle of it. And my grandparents all lived through that ordeal and tried to raise families in the middle of the Depression. So there was a different mindset about food with them and I think one of the things that affected them more than anything is the advent of convenience food. And when we were—we had an abundance again and my grandparents could do it, my grandmother discovered canned biscuits and never looked back.

**00:06:51**

In fact, I remember her trying to make biscuits because she was out of canned biscuits and they were awful because she had forgotten how to do it.

**00:07:00**

**OM:** So a lost bit of our past there with—

**00:07:06**

**DLF:** Yeah, yeah.

**00:07:07**

**OM:** —the invention of these convenience foods. When did your interest in food go from you know just watching and observing to actually wanting to write about it and deal with that?

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**DLF:** It's interesting. I didn't really—ironically the first thing that I—that survives that I wrote, I was home sick from school one day and I wrote a book while I was home sick and it was—the book was about what I had for lunch that day. And I drew a picture of every single thing that I ate and I was so proud of this book. And somewhere it survives; we still have it. So ironically the very first thing I ever wrote was about food.

**00:07:52**

But the interest kicked in when I started writing seriously mid-point in my architectural career and I decided to leave that aside and the old saw is you write about what you know. And I loved food and I loved cooking. Fortunately I didn't know that I didn't know enough to be writing about food and I made friends with John Martin Taylor and Karen Hess who were two

very fine culinary historians and phenomenal cooks and they sort of whipped me into shape.

**[Laughs]**

**00:08:27**

**OM:** Where—when—where and when was that?

**00:08:30**

**DLF:** That was in the mid to late eighties. I started really seriously pursuing my first cookbook in the mid to late eighties. It took me about eight years to write that book and then it was published in 1995. That was when I pretty much left architectural practice behind and pursued food writing full-time.

**00:08:50**

**OM:** Did anyone—who encouraged you or where did you get the catalyst to—to say I want to write a food—a cookbook?

**00:08:58**

**DLF:** Well I don't exactly know how it evolved that way but I started considering writing a cookbook. And my first idea was to write about Italian food for Southerners and then I thought well you idiot. Marcella Hazan has written the definitive books on Italian food for Americans. You don't need to reinvent the wheel and if you really want to do something meaningful what you have to do is what Marcella did and go back to your roots.

**00:09:26**

So I started to explore Southern food then and what I realized very early on was in order to make some sense of this I had to go back to the roots, to the beginnings and that of course was when Southern food was born in the wealthy slave-owners' kitchens in the little kitchen out behind the big house where an African cook was cooking essentially European food and transformed it, actually made it into something new and completely different from what we had—had before and gradually introduced African ingredients and African ways with food into this Anglo-kind of cooking, Anglo-Franco kind of cooking.

**00:10:16**

And that really, once—once I discovered that and discovered this beautiful cuisine from that era I was hooked.

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**OM:** Did you ever work in a kitchen?

**00:10:26**

**DLF:** I did briefly. I was very briefly a short order cook after I left architectural practice. I actually opened a café. A woman who had taken cooking classes from me convinced me to open her restaurant kitchen. The place was called Juicy Lucy's and it was not a happy experience for either one of us.

**00:10:49**

**OM:** Where was that restaurant?

**00:10:50**

**DLF:** It was on Abercorn Street right across from the cemetery, which seems appropriate somehow. **[Laughs]** The restaurant actually survived a couple of years after I left.

**00:11:00**

**OM:** Uh-hmm, and it was obviously a financial disaster and not a culinary disaster?

**00:11:06**

**DLF:** Well the—the cooking was—the cooking was good for the most part I think. That’s not really bragging. We kept it very simple. It was just a lunch café. We tried to do a hotplate special and it had a Caribbean sort of theme so I wasn’t really doing the food that I was writing about.

**00:11:28**

**OM:** Okay; let’s—this is wonderful having these questions here for me by the way because I reach a dead point and I’m like—

**00:11:37**

**DLF:** It’s really easy.

**00:11:38**

**OM:** So how have you seen Southern food evolve over time?

**00:11:42**

**DLF:** Um, well there are two things that have happened to Southern food’s evolution. One of them is tragic and the other one is encouraging. The tragic part of course is—is the story I told

very early on about my grandmother and her biscuits. Convenience food came around, fast food came around, and affluence made it possible for large numbers of people to have these things and we started to drift away from our culinary roots and we started to allow packaged convenience foods to adulterate the quality of the food that we cooked at home. Cooking became an exercise in dumping various cans together and that's—that's not cooking at all.

**00:12:29**

The encouraging thing is the renaissance of—of serious cooking, of the so-called gourmet cooking in which people became obsessed with quality ingredients and things that once could be had in the South that had been missing for 100 years came back again. Real parmesan cheese; you find parmesan cheese being advertised in Savannah's newspapers in the 1790s—the real thing, brine-cured olives from Italy and Greece and France probably, the best Florence oil which meant Tuscan olive oil. It didn't necessarily mean it was from Tuscany by the way. They used Florence oil the way we use Kleenex to describe a tissue. It was the best that you could get.

**00:13:25**

**OM:** I remember several years ago when I interviewed you, you said that at one point going into a grocery store in the South was I don't—I don't mean to paraphrase your words 'cause it is two years after all, but you were—it was something to the effect that grocery stores in the South a long time ago were just scary places 'cause they—you know had—they didn't even have olive oil and they didn't have mushrooms or stuff like that.

**00:13:52**

**DLF:** It was very basic, very basic stuff and we had lost a lot of things that—that once were commonplace in markets. One of my favorite things is artichokes. We tend to think that the

Italian food craze restored artichokes to American tables or introduced it to American tables but that's not at all true. You find recipes for artichokes in the early nineteenth century and Jefferson made meticulous notes about the food that was sold in the Washington markets when he was President.

**00:14:22**

Artichokes, mushrooms, asparagus, broccoli, something that—that we supposedly didn't eat until about seventy-five years ago, all of these things were commonplace in the markets and—and trust me, they weren't carting those things in and selling them as oddities. If they weren't selling, people weren't—weren't bringing them into sell, and they weren't going to waste their farmland growing them. So we know these things were eaten then.

**00:14:48**

**OM:** So this is a renaissance of good food?

**00:14:52**

**DLF:** Yeah; and I find that really encouraging. There are things that are spotty about it and people tend to get a little precious with it sometimes, but I—it is encouraging.

**00:15:07**

**OM:** A lot of talk about the South; when you talk about the South either its history or its food for that matter. A lot of it is about tradition and the past and is—is a lot of that talk just romantic or is it accurate? And it's the talking about food now.

**00:15:25**

**DLF:** Yeah, a lot of it—a lot of it is very romantic. I think that we have to remember that when you talk about the cooking that was published in cookbooks and written down in household notebooks in the nineteenth century and in the—or eighteenth century to a certain extent there's—there's more of a record in the nineteenth century than of the eighteenth, we have to realize that we're talking about ten percent of the population. We're talking about the small upper class of wealthy planters and wealthy businessmen whose families could afford these things and whose families could be educated enough to read and write and have the leisure time to write a cookbook.

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So we're talking about an elitist kind of thing. So when people talk to me today about—about gourmet cooking becoming an elitist thing again, well it—it always was. Hello? So I think there's a tendency to romanticize those things. The cooking of the lower middle-classes and the—the poor and the—the slaves was very basic indeed.

**00:16:27**

**OM:** Yeah, I mean you couldn't have—could you have a Southern cookbook back in the—in the slavery times because the—the slaves didn't read and write?

**00:16:37**

**DLF:** Well yeah, you could. And what's interesting is that those foodways from the—the slave cooks managed to find their way very quickly into print. They're not talked about as being foodways of the African cooks, but that's what they are. Gumbo turns up very early. It's not called that until New Orleans, but—and—and actually you begin to see it in places like Carolina. But yeah, you find those African things in those cookbooks.

**00:17:09**

**OM:** Hearing your knowledge of the foodways of the South I wonder when did you start to research all of this. When did—when did you decide that you weren't just going to cook this stuff, you were going to find out where it came from?

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**DLF:** Well when I started writing that first cookbook and I decided that I would write a book about Southern food and I realized that I had to go back to the roots of the cooking. And once I got into the roots then you know it sort of wrote itself. It—that was when I really became fascinated with it and understanding the—the unsung role of the African American in the development of Southern food was an important—an important thing.

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**OM:** So to prepare something that is typically Southern what would that be?

**00:18:00**

**DLF:** Oh my goodness. There's so many things that are typically Southern. The top of the head things of course are the things that everybody talks about, the things that are reeled off of everybody's lips when you say Southern food. Fried chicken, biscuits, and sweet tea and macaroni and cheese and slow-cooked vegetables with—with pork in them, those are things that we immediately identify as Southern.

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But then you find more subtle and elegant things. I've just finished a research project for the Jefferson Foundation where we took seventy-five of the manuscript recipes from the family's recipe collections, from the family's manuscript collections which are vast and—and probably the really interesting thing about the Randolphs and the Jefferson family is that probably as much has been lost as has survived. Only ten of the recipes in Jefferson's handwriting actually survive in the modern time. We know he wrote more than that.

**00:18:59**

So we find—it's really fascinating looking through these recipes and redeveloping for us in a modern kitchen which is—it was my job on the project.

**00:19:11**

**OM:** A lot of people when they would think of typically Southern food they would automatically think fried. Is that necessarily always the case?

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**DLF:** No; actually you do find a lot of fried food and the reason is because if any place where you have abundant fuel or even a shortage of fuel especially and cheap fat and a hot climate you're going to find frying because frying is—is hot work, but it doesn't last very long. And you don't need a lot of fuel to do it. You've got to have an intense heat but it doesn't have to last a long time.

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So frying becomes something that's very common in a hot climate like ours. You go anywhere in the world where you've got that combination, cheap fat, either a scarcity of fuel or

an abundance of it, and lots of heat in the—in the climate, then you're going to find frying. So yeah, it's a big element.

**00:20:08**

I would say probably the thing that is more intrinsically Southern is the closeness to the land and it's one of the things that makes us very close to Italian and French Provincial cooking and one of the reasons there's so much similarity between those cuisines, I don't mean that you can't tell them apart or you're going to bite into something Southern and think oh my god, this is—you know this is just like Tuscany but you find a lot of the same elements. You do actually find a lot of the same elements, you know—.

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**OM:** Including seafood.

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**DLF:** Oh yeah, and you also find—but you find things like slow-cooked beans with pork cooked in them and—in Italy. And we think—we're almost ashamed of that dish; we're almost ashamed of the slow-cooked green beans with the salt pork and maybe a little bit of onion in them and—and people sort of poke fun at it. But if you called it a ragu of green beans which is what Mary Randolph called it in 1824 then it suddenly gets a cache about it and we don't make fun of it when it's French or Italian, but—.

**00:21:20**

**OM:** Do you think Southerners have been pre-programmed to look down on their own food?

**00:21:25**

**DLF:** I do. I think most Americans in general have been pre-programmed to look down on their food. I think we have a real inferiority complex when it comes to the cooking of our country because it's so adapted and because to a large extent in the twentieth century it was—it was literally dumbed down. Convenience foods took over. You know these packaged foods took over. We don't seem to leave—be able to leave well enough alone. We have a tendency to think that if a little is good a lot is going to be terrific. So yeah, I think we have a serious inferiority complex about our food.

**00:22:04**

**OM:** More on the personal side, where—when did you start writing for newspapers and magazines?

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**DLF:** I started writing for newspapers off and on—actually before I left architectural practice.

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**OM:** Which was in the eighties you said?

**00:22:22**

**DLF:** Yeah, the—actually the early, I think the early nineties was probably when I officially started. I can't remember. There was a local opinion paper called the *Yokel, Local and Vocal* and Billy Hughes published it. And Billy was the official Editor and I was the Food Editor, which meant that my diatribe always ended with a recipe. It was very rarely about food, but I always

ended with a recipe and I always tried to some sort of convoluted segway from my diatribe into the recipe.

**00:22:57**

I remember doing a long column one time about female impersonators that ended with a recipe for red flannel hash because there was a red wool mentioned in the [*Laughs*]—mentioned in the article. So I started doing that probably it was the early nineties when I started doing that—maybe the very late eighties. And then started freelancing for the newspaper in the—the mid-nineties and then when Martha Nesbit left the paper for good in 1999 they actually—she called me and said, “I’m not doing this anymore and now is your chance if you’re interested in being a food writer for a newspaper.”

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And I thought, “Oh yeah; right, Martha. I’m going to step into your shoes. That’s never going to happen.” But two weeks later the newspaper called me and made me an offer and actually asked me to do it.

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**OM:** And Martha Nesbit was?

**00:23:51**

**DLF:** Martha Nesbit was the Food Editor of the *Savannah Morning News* for ten years and then she was a freelancer for them for another ten or fifteen years, so a very long time that Martha was involved with the newspaper, almost twenty-two—twenty-three years maybe she was involved with the newspaper.

**00:24:08**

**OM:** Why didn't you think that you were up to it?

**00:24:11**

**DLF:** Well Martha was seasoned. She was a seasoned journalist. She had been doing it for years. Her writing was clean, her recipes were clean; she came into food writing from a different kind of perspective than I did, but it was very direct. Her style was very direct and—and very down to earth and I just—I hadn't done that kind of writing before.

**00:24:43**

**OM:** Uh-hm; what did you—what did you like most about it and what did you dislike most about it?

**00:24:46**

**DLF:** Well the thing I've loved about it is the contact with people and the friends that I've made from the journalistic side of things. You interview somebody and then suddenly you get close to them. I've met Ina Garten. Nathalie Dupree is a very close friend. Of course I met Nathalie aside from the newspaper. I've interviewed so many wonderful people and—and made so many contacts that wouldn't have happened otherwise. And people stop me on the street and tell me how much they love my columns and love the work that I do and that's very gratifying. I—I said one time to somebody, "I have a handwritten note from Julia Childs saying she loved my first book. Do you know how many handwritten notes I have from famous architects saying they loved my buildings? None is how many."

**00:25:41**

And you know people don't stop me on the street and say, "Oh my god; that Chapel at Wesley—at Skid-away Island Methodist Church, I love that building. It's just fabulous." People who know about it say they like it and that it's a charming building. But people stop me all the time and talk about how wonderful my food writing is and that's very gratifying.

**00:26:00**

The thing I don't like about it is the—you know every year it comes around and you've got to write about Christmas again and you've got to write about Easter again, you've got to write about St. Patrick's Day again and coming up with fresh ideas is—is very tedious. And the—the limitations that journalism imposes on you; there's just so much space that you have. You can't get into too much depth. There's—they've got to leave plenty of space for the advertisers, so they really don't want you to say too much. I don't like that.

**00:26:41**

**OM:** So where do you get your ideas? Would you hang around people who cook? Do you go to restaurants? Do you—?

**00:26:48**

**DLF:** I love what Agatha Christie said about that one time. Somebody asked her where she got all her ideas and she said, "I go to Marks & Spencer." [*Laughs*] They just come to you and I don't really know how to describe that creative process. It—it's evolutionary and it doesn't—it's sometimes hard to pin down the source of an idea. Sometimes I don't even realize it's happening. I remember writing about something a few months ago and picking up a copy of *Martha Stewart Living* and flipping through it and seeing an article about the very thing that I had written about

and realized that I had flipped through that magazine and said oh, well that would be a really interesting thing to write about. And then I had forgotten that that's where I got the idea.

**00:27:35**

So you know sometimes I'll meet a colleague who has got a new book coming out and it's a book on say I don't know, the—the food of Guadalajara or something, so out of that comes a story on—on South American cooking or Central American cooking or you know—something, something really will click from that. And I remember doing a story about Mexican cooking because I had been on a—I participated in a—a seminar at one of the IACP Conventions which is the International Association of Culinary Professionals where the—these four wonderful Mexican women who had—whose—for whom English was not their original language did this gorgeous presentation about the basic flavors of Mexico and they had tasting samples and things. And it was very compelling and I think I ended up doing a food story about one of the elements later on.

**00:28:43**

**OM:** Well I want to shift gears and talk about your friends in the FSA and the SFA—excuse me, because we were just talking about some of your other friends and friends in the public that you meet. And I'm going—actually going to create a new track here so that people can easily identify it.

**00:29:01**

**[End Damon Lee Fowler-Part One Interview]**

**[Begin Damon Lee Fowler-Part Two Interview]****00:00:01**

**Orlando Montoya:** And we are still talking with Damon Lee Fowler. It is Tuesday, March 8, 2005 and I neglected to mention my name at the beginning of this. I am Orlando Montoya and we're here at the studios of WSVH Radio in Savannah conducting this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance, which brings us to the second half of this oral history interview.

**00:00:30**

How did you become involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

**00:00:33**

**Damon Lee Fowler:** Well I became involved in the group; I'm one of the fifty founders and I became involved when like so many people in the group we got this enigmatic phone call from John Egerton who is sort of the grandfather of our group. And in his inimitable way he said, "Hey man, we're going to kind of do this. You want to come along for the ride?" And I was very flattered to be asked to be a part of this founding group. And—and I really wanted to see Southern food celebrated and preserved in a meaningful way. There had been other attempts at an organization like this and I thought the only way it's ever going to work is if we all sort of pull together and try to make it work.

**00:01:14**

So I said sure. And we all went to Birmingham the summer of 1999 and interestingly enough that was—that was a year when a lot of things got pulled out from under me personally. So it was very gratifying to be asked to be involved in the beginning of something new.

**00:01:36**

**OM:** Were you involved in either of the Southern food organizations that pre-dated the SFA, the Society for Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food or the American Southern Food Institute?

**00:01:48**

**DLF:** I was actually a member of the American Southern Food Institute but not an active member. I belonged to the group. I actually spoke one time at one of the meetings that they had. And but I wasn't an active member of that group and I think I was technically on the roll of the first one but I was never really involved in it.

**00:02:11**

**OM:** You were on the Board you say or on the—?

**00:02:12**

**DLF:** No, I was on a—on the roll as a—as a member but I never paid any dues and I never you know got anything in the mail from them or anything like that.

**00:02:23**

**OM:** So the first meeting of the Southern Foodways Alliance was in Birmingham?

00:02:27

**DLF:** Yes.

00:02:27

**OM:** And what do you recall about that meeting?

00:02:30

**DLF:** I remember this atmosphere of—of hope and of excitement and togetherness. It was really one of the—the most meaningful things that—that I had done up ‘til then. Nathalie Dupree and her—her brand new husband Jack Bass and I rode out together to Birmingham. We converged at Nathalie’s house in Charleston and we took off from there and went out to Birmingham for this meeting.

00:03:05

That meetings was the fifty founders which are listed I think on our website and for a while we listed our names ad nauseum and finally those of us who were among that group finally said John T. you’ve got to stop listening the—the founders. We’re sick of seeing our names over and over again. *[Laughs]* But—

00:03:24

**OM:** Did anything exciting or—talk about what had happened?

00:03:29

**DLF:** Well one of the most exciting things for me was—was one of the fifty founders was Frank Stitt who was the chef at Highland’s Bar and Grill, his—his own restaurant. He and Pardis, his wife actually fed us a dinner and it was one of the most amazing meals I’ve ever had. It was about five courses. There wasn’t a misstep anywhere. It was absolutely some of the most gorgeous food.

**00:03:55**

**OM:** What—what kind of food?

**00:03:56**

**DLF:** I remember the most perfect fried oysters I’ve ever had in my whole life. We had—oh my goodness, now—now all the wonderful food we had is going to just completely go out of my head.

**00:04:11**

**OM:** Well just the fact that you remembered fried oysters after six years is amazing.

**00:04:14**

**DLF:** Yeah, it—they were really amazing. They were some of the very best fried oysters I’ve ever had in my whole life. Frank is—is really one of the—the culinary geniuses of the new Southern restaurant. And I remember the togetherness of that meal, sharing that time together. The other thing I remember is I was on the committee for forming the mission statement. And I remember Crescent Dragon Wagon with her wild bright red hair standing up with a marker as we

came up with the—the mission statement scribbling things out and sort of working us into this wonderful frenzy.

**00:04:56**

That was a really, really nice experience. And sitting around the table with so many wonderful people that John Egerton and Nathalie Dupree and Marlene and—and Louis Osteen—Louis is a wonderful chef in Charleston, Frank Stitt, John Taylor I think was there—and we were sitting in the offices of *Southern Living Magazine*. They have a wonderful boardroom there that we met in. And I don't know if you've ever been to that campus but it's really beautiful. It's a wonderful modern building. You wouldn't think that it would be the way it is from the magazine, but it's a gorgeous building, gorgeous campus, wonderful landscaping and lots of sort of wooded areas.

**00:05:44**

**OM:** How did they hear about you or how did they first approach you? Did they like call you or—?

**00:05:48**

**DLF:** John Egerton called me and I think that—that John Egerton and Nathalie were the two people that were instrumental in getting me as one of the fifty founders. They were sort of the—the godfather and godmother of this—this effort to make this work this time.

**00:06:07**

**OM:** The godfather and godmother of maybe Southern cooking.

**00:06:09**

**DLF:** Yeah; and in a lot of ways I think you could say that. Probably some of the other fifty founders would—would be a little upset about that but that’s okay.

**00:06:20**

**OM:** What was the—what was the vision for SFA when it began?

**00:06:23**

**DLF:** I think we just wanted to see Southern food preserved. We wanted to see its place in American history better appreciated. We wanted people to take the same pleasure in it that we took in it. We wanted to see it celebrated. I don’t think we had quite as clear a vision as has developed over the years since that founding in 1999, but since then that vision has gelled a little bit more.

**00:06:58**

**OM:** How so?

**00:07:00**

**DLF:** Well I think we’ve become a little more focused. We’ve—we’ve got six—seven symposiums under our belt. That’s a lot of scholarly papers and even unscholarly papers, a lot of time together where we’ve—we’ve talked about a lot of issues and hashed a lot of things out. Initially we had—we had a symposium this past year on Race and Southern Food and it—we ended up calling it Southern Food in Black and White. But when we started really talking about

it of course everybody's assumption is that we're going to talk about black and white racial relations.

**00:07:40**

And people started saying, "Well, what about all the Mexican Americans in Texas and Mississippi and Louisiana? And what about the Native Americans; what about the Cajuns which are the Acadian French that came down from Canada and settled in the—the swamps of Louisiana? What about the Greeks? They came in and—and transformed the Southern restaurant in the 1950s and completely changed a lot of stuff." So we started to understand that there was a complexity about Southern food that was neglected.

**00:08:20**

**OM:** So what was that first mission statement? I know you know it by heart.

**00:08:23**

**DLF:** [*Laughs*]

**00:08:23**

**OM:** What was it word-by-word?

**00:08:25**

**DLF:** Oh yeah, right. To preserve—

**00:08:32**

**OM:** I wasn't being serious. [*Laughs*]

**00:08:32**

**DLF:** —promote and to propagate and celebrate Southern Food. And I'm paraphrasing of course because I don't remember the exact wording but it actually hasn't changed much from—. I think we've—we've tweaked the wording a little bit but basically it's the same.

**00:08:50**

**OM:** And has the focus of the organization stayed the same or has it veered off from that in any way?

**00:08:56**

**DLF:** I would say that it's pretty much stayed that course. The thing that concerns me about the Southern Foodways Alliance and that will continue to concern me that I've sort of been the—to sound slightly biblical—the voice crying in the wilderness, the focus has been too much on commercial food. The focus has been way too much on restaurants, way too much on things like moon pies and RC Colas and Coca Colas, on—and we talk about fried chicken and we have five restaurant chefs come and fry chicken for us. And that's very nice but you know Southern food was at its heart a home-based cuisine. It was born on home hearths. It developed on home hearths. And that's what it is.

**00:09:47**

Excuse me. And if there's anything that concerns me about the organization it's that we have—we've not given enough attention to that, to home cooking, and to the home-based aspect of it.

**00:10:04**

**OM:** So you don't want Southern cooking to be like Greek cooking or Italian cooking or some other forms of cooking where right now if you want to—you know you go to a restaurant to do it.

**00:10:15**

**DLF:** Yeah, yeah.

**00:10:16**

**OM:** It's got to be in the home. So are there any other meetings from those early days that you remember?

**00:10:21**

**DLF:** Um, the symposiums are always very highly charged and those are exciting too. I didn't go to the first symposium. I had a conflict. I was actually—they actually booked the first symposium right after the IACP Convention and it was in Portland, Oregon that year and my best friend lives in Portland and I had already planned to stay a week with her after the convention was over. And I had my ticket bought and everything all set when they called me and said, "We're having this—this meeting and can you come?" And I couldn't; I couldn't even schedule so that I could—could make it there. So I missed the very first one but I've been to all the others.

**00:11:05**

And it—little pieces and parts of those meetings stand out but nothing you know—nothing specific—really glowing about any one meeting.

00:11:16

**OM:** Uh-hmm, it's just the feeling of togetherness and—.

00:11:19

**DLF:** Yeah. Yeah, and the sense of being like a family. You know families don't always get along with each other. But you get the sense that there's a lot of love there even when people are sort of slinging barbs at each other and saying, you don't know what you're talking about. The way my grandmother did it is the right way you know. *[Laughs]*

00:11:42

**OM:** There's a lot of respect?

00:11:44

**DLF:** There is a lot of respect.

00:11:46

**OM:** And you can take—I'm sorry. You can take your headphones off really if you want to—to be more comfortable.

00:11:51

**DLF:** It's okay; the—the headphones are good. I can kind of monitor my voice a little bit that way.

00:11:57

**OM:** So we were talking about the—the role of the SFA in its early days. Did you have any role in developing the programming or the mission or the vision?

**00:12:09**

**DLF:** The mission and vision I think I was involved with to a certain extent. The programming for the symposia we've really had very little to do with that on the Board of Directors. The—the Executive Director is John T. Edge and the committee who up until recently was headed by Jessica Harris pretty well took care of the content and substance of the—of the symposia meetings, so—and the things that we have sort of promoted and—and backed up. But I've been on the Board of Directors ever since the organization began. I was on the Ad-hoc Board from that first meeting and then I was on the Advisory Board that was set up until we could elect a Board. And then I was on the first elected Board and I was President for two years from 2002 until 2004. And I'm still on the Board as Past President and this October I get to step off the Board and put my feet up.

**00:13:23**

Part of me is relieved to finally put that behind me, but the biggest part of me is sad. That's been one of the most meaningful things I've ever done. And I'll miss the camaraderie of those Board meetings and I'll miss the—the excitement of feeling as if I'm a part of something that's bigger than I am.

**00:13:42**

**OM:** You mentioned that you'll be said, but also relieved. Was it a lot of work?

**00:13:47**

**DLF:** It—it's a lot of work and it's a lot of expense. And for somebody who is a freelance writer—somebody who has a disposable income it's not that much. For somebody who has an expense account where they can write some of these trips off it's—it's not that much, but for a freelance writer like me it was a—it was a big commitment, both in time and in—in dollars.

**00:14:12**

**OM:** Any Board meetings or any things that stand out from your tenure on the Board?

**00:14:24**

**DLF:** There's so many things that—there's so many things that stand out, little snippets of things more than anything. I remember Nathalie in the very early days of the Board of Directors forcing us to talk about the things that nobody wanted to talk about and insistently almost making herself obnoxious to—to get us to talk about the things that we needed to cover that we needed to address and there were even people on the Board of Directors who didn't really believe her until after she was off the Board. And then suddenly we were having to address the things that she tried to get them to face early on.

**00:15:11**

**OM:** And be specific. What are you talking about?

**00:15:14**

**DLF:** Oh goodness, specific things; it's going to be hard to—

**00:15:19**

**OM:** Things that needed to be addressed you said.

**00:15:21**

**DLF:** Yeah, things that needed to be addressed, the way that we handled elections, the way that we—the way that we structured the bylaws, the—the way that we handled the meetings themselves, the way that we—we went about beginning some of the programs. We’re doing this oral history campaign for example. That was a daydream that we didn't think was going to happen for a good while and less than five years into the organization we had begun it and we were actually beginning to start an archive now and start a meaningful collection of Southern food history—papers, manuscripts, old cookbooks that are long out of print, things like that—we’re beginning to start to collect those things.

**00:16:21**

**OM:** The organization focuses on food as culture. What does that mean to you?

**00:16:26**

**DLF:** I think food is culture. If you think about the history of civilization, everything is tied to—everything comes back to food. Everything comes back basically to food and procreation. Most of the laws that we have center around commerce that after all was born in getting food and distributing food and trading food, so the other things became shelter, clothing—all these things sort of developed later on but the primal need was food and procreation.

**00:17:12**

**OM:** And what does that mean to you personally though?

00:17:16

**DLF:** Oh what does it mean to me personally?

00:17:22

**OM:** That's the sort of macro-view. That's sort of the economics view of food as culture but—

00:17:27

**DLF:** Yeah, what does it mean to me personally? To me—for me food is inextricably woven into my life. I—I can't imagine—there's hardly an hour that passes where food isn't somehow connected to what I do and the way I think. I mentioned to you a novel that I had been writing for ten years and food is so interwoven into the fabric of this. And the story isn't about food at all. It's not about cooking even. The—the man isn't even a cook; he doesn't know how to cook.

00:18:01

But everything comes back to me with—to food.

00:18:08

**OM:** Everything comes back to me with music. I feel the same way about music that perhaps you do about food. And I can play specific songs with specific times in my life and specific attitudes and specific days and events really. Can—can the same be said of you and food?

00:18:27

**DLF:** Oh my goodness yes. All I have to do to bring Genoa close to me again—I studied architecture in Genoa in the—in the seventies when I was a graduate student at Clemson and all I

have to do is sauté chopped garlic in olive oil and add a handful of parsley and splash some white wine into it and the co-mingling of those flavors brings Genoa back to me just as crisp and clear as—as if I had been there yesterday.

**00:18:57**

When Gottlieb started making croissants again I had not had a croissant like that since I was in Paris. That was twenty-five years ago. It's—that's a really long time, actually longer than twenty-five years, and just the aroma of that genuine croissant and the flavor, the texture of it, the—the substance that it has because the ones that we have in this country mostly don't really have any substance. We think they're not supposed to have it but they are.

**00:19:27**

**OM:** You mean the crois-sandwich doesn't have—?

**00:19:30**

**DLF:** Oh, my goodness. You know, don't even get me started on that.

**00:19:33**

**OM:** Sorry, better to think about Gottlieb's. This is the restaurant at—at Bull and Broughton [Streets] and better to think about that.

**00:19:40**

**DLF:** Yeah, I mean there—there are primal things. Every time I start to make a cake and I start creaming the butter and sugar, the smell that—that has brings my grandmother close to me again. Whenever I fry chicken the smell that—that has brings my paternal grandmother back to me

again. It's odd that that's more of my paternal grandmother than my maternal and my mother because the—you know all three of them made wonderful fried chicken. My—my mother had a reputation for her fried chicken when we lived in Clover, South Carolina. But—

**00:20:14**

**OM:** So by preserving food we're preserving ourselves really?

**00:20:19**

**DLF:** Yeah. Yeah, I think it's very much—I think food is a part of our identity whether we recognize it or not.

**00:20:28**

**OM:** Do you have—going back to the Southern Foodways Alliance do you have ideas for the future of the organization?

**00:20:35**

**DLF:** Yeah, I was very much encouraged by the idea of the oral histories. Oral histories are something that have only become possible with recording technology. Before that we didn't have anything, so of course we had to depend on people who could read and write to give us a record of history.

**00:20:57**

So we know that—that record that we had before oral histories is skewed. We know that it's flawed. It's seriously flawed because nobody talked about their slave cooks until—well

goodness, until the twentieth century they didn't really talk about their slave cooks, so it was rare to even mention an African American cook in one of these written records.

**00:21:19**

So until the twentieth century when we had recordings and people started to go in, to talk to people who had been born in slavery, that we really began to have that kind of a record. So I think that's a very important project.

**00:21:34**

I think having an archive is a very important thing too and—and the idea of—of having an archive that's endowed that will be preserved in perpetuity where people can go and—and study manuscript collections and cookbooks that are long, long out of print, and the idea that when I die I can leave my collection to somebody and it will be preserved and it'll actually have some meaning to them.

**00:21:59**

**OM:** Do you—you mentioned several times African Americans and food here. Do you think that African Americans are well represented in the Southern Foodways Alliance and in—?

**00:22:13**

**DLF:** I do not think they're well represented. I think that we have some—some very fine and very outspoken African American members and they're very well represented among the fifty founders. We have Jessica Harris and Dory Sanders and Toni Tipton Martin and Joe Randall who—who's here in Savannah, just off the top of my head as one of the—as among the fifty founders. All—most all of those people have spoken at meetings, but as far as the membership goes, African Americans are a very small portion. It's predominantly a white face on the

Southern Foodways Alliance. I find that a little bit disturbing but I think it's also a fact that it—it may be cultural. I don't exactly know what that is. So I don't think they're well-represented, but on the other hand you would think that—that they were because we tend to revisit that whole issue of race over and over and over again almost to the point that some members have—have complained that we—we spend too much time talking about African Americans—that what about my white grandmother and what about you know the white cook that—that cooked for this wealthy white family? They weren't all black. Most of them were though. I mean the reality is that most of them were.

**00:23:35**

**OM:** Anything—well what has been the great accomplishment of the Southern Foodways Alliance so far?

**00:23:40**

**DLF:** I think that the—the thing that I'm proudest of is the oral history campaign. I think that's the most important thing we've done. Second to that I would say that the—the growing national awareness. The *New York Times* has started writing articles about Southern food and they never did before. Even when Craig Claiborne was there, they—they very rarely even mentioned Southern food when he was the Food Editor.

**00:24:09**

So—and I think there's a growing appreciation for it and people are beginning to understand Southern food outside of New Orleans. If anybody knew about Southern food, that's what they knew. Shrimp Creole—that's Southern food.

00:24:21

**OM:** Well now Paula Dean is broadcast into millions of homes and—.

00:24:25

**DLF:** Yeah, bless her heart.

00:24:29

**OM:** Do you say that with irony or—? [*Laughs*]

00:24:32

**DLF:** [*Laughs*] No, I think—I think Paula is wonderful. She's a—she's a friend of mine and—and I love her dearly. What happens with strong personalities like—like Paula is that people get a fixation that they represent the whole picture and they don't anymore than—Paula doesn't represent the whole picture anymore than—than—.

00:24:55

**OM:** Mario Batali representing—.

00:24:57

**DLF:** Oh, goodness.

00:24:58

**OM:** —Italian food.

00:24:58

**DLF:** Yes. Yeah, exactly. Or, even my beloved Marcella Hazan representing Italian food. I think crusty old Marcello probably comes closer than Mario does about—in—in representing the authentic thing. But it's such a big picture. There's so many complex facets to Southern food and it—it just takes all of us. It takes every face to—to make the whole picture and so in that way—in that sense I think that the extreme popularity of somebody like Paula Dean can be dangerous to the overall effect of Southern food. I don't mean that in a negative way. It's just that it—we stand to have her become a representative of something that is just a small part of it and not the whole picture.

**00:25:57**

**OM:** And maybe that's why the projects such as the oral history project is important because it's drawing from so many different sources.

**00:26:03**

**DLF:** Absolutely. And it's also giving attention to people who wouldn't get attention before.

**00:26:11**

**OM:** Uh-hmm. Is there anything that I've left out that you would like to add?

**00:26:16**

**DLF:** I can't think of anything. I think that—that the future of Southern food is in the hands of something that's even bigger than the Southern Foodways Alliance and that's in the millions of individuals all over the South. And I hope that what we'll be able to accomplish with the Alliance is instilling a sense of pride in all Southerners about their food, encouraging them to

continue to cook it, and to keep those traditions alive. But helping us to understand that the past is a nice place to visit but you can't live there; the places—the places—it's the place you go—to learn it's to inform you but not for you to wallow in.

**00:27:12**

And if we can keep that vision and keep people going forward and taking those traditions into new generations, in some cases redefining and reinventing them but—but keeping them alive then—then I think we'll have done something really wonderful.

**00:27:33**

**OM:** Okay; thank you very much.

**00:27:35**

**DLF:** Thanks.

**00:27:36**

**[End Damon Lee Fowler-Part Two Interview]**

**[END DAMON LEE FOWLER]**