

DAVID BILLEAUD
Owner and Cook, T-Coon's - Lafayette, LA

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Interviewer: Rien T. Fertel, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Plate Lunch Trail - Louisiana

[Begin David Billeaud Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am in Lafayette, Louisiana at T-Coon's on the--what we're calling the Plate Lunch Trail. I'm here with Mr. David Billeaud and I'm going to have him introduce himself, giving his name and his birth date for the record.

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David Billeaud: David Billeaud, April 10, 1959.

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RF: All right; thank you, sir. So what is your position here at T-Coon's?

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DB: Owner, manager, cook, dishwasher.

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RF: So everything--dishwasher too. So let's get into the name. What does--what does T-Coon's--what does that mean?

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DB: T-i--is small in French; I dropped the "I" and just using "T." Coon was my--T-Coon was my father's nickname as a child. And I didn't want people to pronounce 'Ty-Coon' so I just call it T-Coon's.

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RF: How did your father receive that name--that nickname?

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DB: His sister named him as a little child, no telling--probably 'cause he was mischievous as a coon.

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RF: As a raccoon?

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DB: Raccoon; uh-huh.

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RF: And did you have this nickname as a child too?

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DB: No; uh-uh, but every--everyone in the small community we're from had a habit of calling all of us T-Coon 'cause our dad was T-Coon. People would just--some people would anyway. But

no; I--to this day my mother says why does he call himself that? Well, for obvious reasons--
advertising.

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RF: Right; and what community is that you just mentioned?

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DB: Broussard, Louisiana.

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RF: Okay; tell me about growing up in Broussard.

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DB: Well we're a fifth generation grocery, meat market, so growing up in the grocery business we knew everybody, which was cool. We moved away probably early '70s and we moved to Lafayette, but still worked at the store, still knew everybody.

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RF: Okay; and what was the name of this grocery store?

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DB: Billeaud's Grocery.

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RF: Is it still there?

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DB: Yes.

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RF: Okay; is it still owned by the family?

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DB: Yes; five generations.

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RF: Okay; and it--was this the only family restaurant or food business?

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DB: Actually it started off as a--I guess way back in the day it was the bank, it was the general merchandise, it was the clothing, it was a grocery, meat market; then the original building was torn down and relocated to the present location and that continued on as a general mercantile clothing I guess 'til the '60s--'60s, late '60s, early '70s--it was turned just into just a meat market and grocery. And then probably in the late '70s that structure was torn down and the building that stands now as Billeaud's Superette is still a grocery and meat market and plate lunch.

00:04:01

RF: Okay; I see. It sounds like before it became just a grocery and plate lunch place it was kind of a central meeting place for Broussard?

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DB: Well yeah; you had--my great-grandfather--it was a lot of sharecropping, so bills weren't paid 'til the end of the year, if they were paid. Come back next year; try again and that kind of deal. So a lot of people rode the whole year out 'til the crops came in. And I hear stories, you know, where so and so lost their property and to my great-grandfather and 20 and 30 years later were able to get it back, no interest, same amount. I hear stories of my grandmother putting shoes on a lot of feet, you know, 'cause especially around the Depression I imagine when things were really bad.

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RF: And the founder of this store was your great-grandfather?

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DB: My great-grandfather, right.

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RF: What was his name?

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DB: Marshall Billeaud.

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RF: What are your earliest memories about being in this--this place?

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DB: Hmm; earliest memories?

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RF: I mean did you work there as a kid?

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DB: Oh yeah; I grew up in the store. We lived across the street, so we had--as young as our--if it was just sweeping, we--we worked you know and then growing up, as soon as you could meet the--reach the meat block high enough to scrape pork chops, after the--the saw left--the meat left the saw as a steak you scraped it with a little tool and trayed it and de-boned meat, make--I mean make ground meat and anything that could be done we did at an early age.

00:06:09

RF: Uh-hm; and so when you were growing up your grandfather was running the place?

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DB: No; both my grandparents were gone. When my grandmother died I guess in the early--mid-'60s my father who--who is an educated geologist stopped what he was doing and took over the store.

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RF: Tell me about Broussard. I mean Lafayette is connected to Broussard by a couple highways now. What was it like then growing up in Broussard? Was it a more distant community or did it feel more distant?

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DB: Well, Lafayette was much smaller. Broussard was much smaller, so, you know, now they just mingle together. Back then it was two separate communities. Lafayette was--Broussard was 90-percent gravel streets with--with Highway 90 combining the two and then the thruway came in later. But yeah; I mean like anywhere it--it was two separate communities. Now you can barely tell them apart, you know.

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RF: And Billeaud is a Cajun name?

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DB: Billeaud is as Cajun as you can get.

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RF: Tell me about what Cajun is--your Cajun heritage.

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DB: Well from France to Nova Scotia to here, I guess they ran 'til they ran out of places to run [Laughs]. I don't know the real story, but like the Germans further west of us, we came here; where there were others--I really don't know the real history of why they settled here.

00:08:09

RF: What aspects of Cajun culture did you grow up with, whether that be food or music?

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DB: Well my great-grandfather came down and started a syrup kitchen, a syrup business and that is what we know now as Billeaud Sugar Refinery, which is now Billeaud Properties 'cause it's no refinery. And since they held all this property they got into real estate in the early '80s.

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I don't know; that's a pretty general question.

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RF: Well tell me about--well how about language? How was--were people speaking French growing up; did you learn French? Were your parents and grandparents speaking French?

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DB: Of course my dad grew up speaking French. In fact, they had to speak English in school or they were punished. And we didn't learn it because of that, which is a shame. But yeah; my--my dad spoke French as a kid probably as a primary language until school. The nuns took care of that [Laughs].

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RF: All right; tell me a bit more about your parents. Were they--tell me about the role that food played in their lives. Were they home cooks your mother and father?

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DB: Seven kids; we were at the trough three times a day. Every day I watched my mother divide up nine portions to the T, you know. The meal was cooked every day; not eating out and no--we had the grocery store across the street so there was a lot of seven steak, rice and gravy, pork and beans, fresh vegetables. My mother had a Home Ec major so she believed in the food pyramid, and my father was the meat guy. He could stuff and season a pork roast and, you know, handle the barbecue and of course I stepped in at an early age and took care of the barbecue.

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But all the stuff that I cook either came from my mother, my father, or some lady that was working for us at some point in time 'cause I was always in the kitchen.

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RF: At T-Coon's--oh, or as a youngster?

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DB: Yeah; at home.

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RF: Okay; when did you start cooking and what?

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DB: I started cooking as early as I can remember. If it was pancakes or eggs or climbing up on the stool and stirring the roux, growing up in the meat market, you know, I was trying to turn the sausage press at five--six years old. I mean we were always around food.

00:11:44

RF: Yeah; and--and in a little bit we're going to get to hunting and fishing and what role that plays in your life. Did that play a role in your father's life? Was he a sportsman?

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DB: Yeah; we--we grew up fishing, which is no small feat, I mean with four boys.

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RF: And what do you mean by that?

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DB: Well four boys in a boat and you got to be quiet. Don't make any noise; you're going to scare the sac-a-lait. But even food played a big part then 'cause I was always ready to jump on the bologna sandwiches first. **[Laughs]** I can remember clear as day.

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RF: Are those bologna sandwiches that you'd pack on the boat?

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DB: Yeah; we had the whole tubes of bologna and we'd slice them at the store any thickness we wanted you know. So we always had bologna sandwiches or lunchmeat sandwiches on the boat.

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RF: And they'd be on--on white bread?

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DB: Oh yeah; Evangeline Maid Bread.

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RF: All right; so was T-Coon's your first role in the food industry outside of your family's grocery and meat market?

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DB: Yeah; when I opened downtown 18 years ago I had never worked in a restaurant so I didn't know the--I didn't know the business part. Hell, I didn't even know what the food cost was. But I knew what I cooked people would like. I--I had always been cooking prior to that and, you know, always got positive results. And, you know, I told you before, I think taste buds are universal and most people like the same tastes and textures and whatever.

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RF: So what did you do prior to opening up the first T-Coon's?

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DB: I was in insurance and investments for eight years and prior to that I was offshore for eight years. Remember one of my first jobs in the oil field I was 16 and I went to work on a workboat out of Galveston. And it's me, the captain, and three winos. The first thing he says is who knows how to cook? Well I wasn't letting them cook my food, so I raised my hand. And I remember the first thing I found in the freezer was a pork roast. So I put together my seasoning mix, probably similar to what I use today and I injected it and stuffed it, and man, I was a hit. **[Laughs]** I was the king.

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RF: So you cooked forever after that?

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DB: Well you know it's just another example of the positive feedback you get when you cook a good meal. You know you feed off of that and--.

00:15:04

RF: All right; well tell me about this first location of T-Coon's--where it was.

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DB: Well I had been doing festivals for a few years and I needed a spot to prepare and freeze and ready my festivals. I had previously been doing it at night at my dad's store, hauling everything to a freezer at another location, and for one festival you got to start with 1,000 pounds

of boudin for example. And then you got to go back and make some more if you need to, so I definitely needed to get out of it or get a place.

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Well I found this location downtown in Lafayette, just a ramshack[le]. I mean the roof was leaking; hobos were living in it. So the rent was dirt cheap. Well I figured that would be the--that would be a good location to do a plate lunch also. So I could do both out of there.

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Well, little did I know that it wasn't just plate lunches and festivals; it was Downtown Alive and Mardi Gras and every--every time you turned around there was something to cook for. So that worked out pretty good.

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RF: Well what was your first--can you remember your first day opening your own place? What was it like?

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DB: Um--

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RF: What was going through your mind?

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DB: Shew; how much jambalaya should I cook? I probably cooked for 100 and I had I think 65 customers the first day. And we had a good start. We were--you know we struggled for the first

two years to make a--a profit; you got a lot of capital expense you're not aware of. You got to pay all that off, and I was opened two and a half years doing pretty good and Streetscape started.

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RF: What is that?

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DB: Well they decided to renovate downtown, so they shut me down for 13 months.

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RF: Oh they shut the business down or they--they--?

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DB: They shut the streets down. They promised that I'd have access from the rear and every day they'd put the barricades up and every day at 10 o'clock I'd pull the barricades down. There was a policeman there: "You can't do that." I'm like, "Stop me; let's--you know, let's decide how we're going to handle this 'cause every day I'm taking the barricades down."

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Well that lasted 13 months. Meanwhile, my partners wanted to throw in the towel and I'm like look. Let me get my line back. I'll buy y'all out. So sure enough after 13 months I got a line waiting outside. The guy across the street at the bank lent me some money and I paid my customers off. It took me a year to pay the IRS off and the State and then we just grew and grew and grew. You know from \$300 a day to twenty-something hundred dollars a day. And that was basically my first, you know, 10 years.

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RF: And was the menu the same as it is in this iteration?

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DB: The menu was exactly the same except now I have everything every day. And back then I had one or two things every--each day of the week. But now it's just a lot bigger. But you know it's still the catfish courtbouillion, the shrimp and okra stew, smothered beef, smothered pork.

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RF: And before we--before I ask more questions about the menu, what festivals were you doing and what were you cooking at these festivals?

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DB: Well Festival International of course was downtown; I'd do jambalaya, red beans and rice, boudin, étouffée. Mardi Gras, again, was right at my front door; that was a very big day for us. I'd sell beer and drinks and more of the same food. I like to stick to items that I can use in the restaurant, you know--nothing I have to sit on or eat.

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RF: All right; well let's start with breakfast at this T-Coon's. You open very early.

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DB: We open at 5:00; somebody is here at 4:30 getting everything ready and 5 o'clock people are coming in.

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RF: Okay; and--and tell me about something I've not seen anywhere else I've ever had breakfast is each table gets a coffee--a full coffee canister on it.

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DB: Well, the more waitresses, the less money they make. So if you want to keep some real talent they got to make some money. And putting the coffee carafe on each table was a way to give them less work. So you sit down and you got a coffee cup. You got all the fixings and the coffee carafe; you basically serve yourself coffee. That--that will give my waitress a little bit, you know, free time, so she can take orders and bus tables and do some of the other stuff.

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RF: And tell me about the brand of coffee you serve.

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DB: Mellow Joy--you don't want to go there.

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RF: Okay; we won't go there. **[Laughs]** We'll just say they're a local company, correct?

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DB: Local company.

00:21:13

RF: All right; let's talk about lunch. Yesterday--

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DB: We're finished with breakfast already?

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RF: Well no, let's do--

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DB: The coffee messed you up?

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RF: No; okay. **[Laughs]** I can mention one I think kind of rarity that's on your breakfast menu is an omelet with crawfish in it. Can you talk about that?

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DB: Well I don't think it's no more rare than a brisket omelet or a pork roast omelet. Where you going to find a pork roast omelet anywhere in the world? I've never heard of it but I mean how good is that?

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RF: What do you do this pork roast? Let's talk about that.

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DB: Well it's--it's a pork roast. We--we inject it and season it real well and cook it perfectly, dice it, and when we get the order we throw it on the grill and season it some more--onions, cheese, and throw it in the omelet. No different than our homemade breakfast sausage omelet or our homemade smoked sausage omelet. Pork roast, bacon, ham, we do spinach omelet; my favorite is spinach and bacon.

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RF: What items are made from scratch here on the breakfast menu?

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DB: Oh, the breakfast sausage, the smoked sausage--well everything but the ham and the bacon.

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RF: Okay; and do those sausages go back to the old family meat market and grocery?

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DB: Well, obviously that's where I learned how to make sausage. Is it the same recipe? Probably not, you know.

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RF: Right; and what about the breads? Are some of the breads homemade?

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DB: All the bread is homemade. I've been making the bread for 18 years now. We do a wheat bread, a white bread, it's a French cut--French toast.

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RF: What do you mean by that?

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DB: Well it's the thick-sliced loaf and we'll toast it. So you'll get a toast--French toast for breakfast.

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RF: And why did you decide to make your own sliced bread rather than, you know, buy Evangeline bread, which you mentioned before?

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DB: Well, I mean that's cheesy. Where is the love? Where is the love throwing out some Evangeline Maid bread on your plate?

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RF: Right; right.

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DB: It's just something that's unique you're not going to get anywheres else.

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RF: What kind of breakfast crowd do you get in terms of--of who comes in?

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DB: Anybody from the average laborer, the--the lawyer, the banker, every walk of life; I mean I've got millionaires sitting next to, you know, everybody. I got a very good cross-section of the--the economy. You'll see dirt under somebody's table from muddy boots. You know, you'll see somebody in \$2,000 shoes next to them. We all got a few things in common [*Laughs*]; eating is one of them.

00:24:52

RF: All right; and tell me about the crawfish omelet.

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DB: It's not Chinese crawfish. It's basically, we have a lot of étouffée made at all times. We'll throw a good eight-ounce scoop of étouffée on the grill. And get it steaming hot; throw it in the omelet with cheese. And that's it.

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RF: You mentioned Chinese crawfish. I'm sure your feelings on that are obvious. But what changes have you seen; what do you think about this influx of foreign crawfish coming into Louisiana in the--well past decade?

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DB: Hmm; now we're going political.

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RF: And we can do that or not if you want.

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DB: Well it's the same--it's the same direction every other aspect of our country has gone--it's a shame that you know we got to pay \$5 a pound for Chinese crawfish and \$18 a pound for Louisiana--Lafayette crawfish; it's crazy. But what are you going to do? You know, I don't have to serve the Chinese; I don't serve it. I get them from Spain, who probably gets it from China; who knows? **[Laughs]** I've tried some Chinese products. I'm not too impressed.

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RF: Right; and let's talk about lunch. Do you describe yourself as a plate lunch place?

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DB: Oh, I'm nothing but a plate lunch. I'm not a chef. I'm a cook. Cooks work hard.

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RF: What's the difference between a chef and cook if there's more than that?

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DB: Well to me a chef had to be taught. You know I can't say that. I was taught of course--I do a lot of things that nobody taught me. I just picture it and I do it. I guess when somebody picks up a paint brush they do the same thing; they picture it and they do it. I can't do it with a paint brush; I promise you. But if I'm going to make some kind of seafood sauce or whatever I just roll with it. I've never written one down or looked at one, you know, but--.

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And you--and that's not 100-percent true because you pick up ideas and you learn, you know. How did I learn to throw my seafood in at the very end and not cook it--overcook it? Well somebody showed me that one day; you know, I don't remember when but--and there are a lot of things you learn the hard way. You learn--I mean how many things I do now because I did it by mistake at some other time, and I learned from my mistake. Hey; what a good idea. Or some idiot in the kitchen did something stupid and I said look; this is a good idea.

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You got to think outside the box at all times and, you know--. There's a lot to be said about out of sight, out of mind; there's so much you see if you stay, you know--stay on the job, stay in the kitchen, stay on top of things. You're always going to change and--and I believe that.

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RF: When new cooks come on, do you train them?

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DB: No new cooks come on.

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RF: Okay; well tell me about that. So you--some of the people in the kitchen that we just walked through have worked here for a long time?

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DB: No. They may not have but they're not doing the cooking.

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RF: Oh, okay; you're doing all the cooking you mean?

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DB: Miss Helen who is now 72, she's been here probably eight years.

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RF: What's her full name?

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DB: Helen Norbert.

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RF: Okay.

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DB: Helen is--let's face it, she's been cooking her entire life, so I got to get in here and I got to make her do it my way, without hurting any feelings. So we have evolved, and basically if Helen does it I don't worry about it. That's where we are. She--she knows the routine. She does the work of any five of these guys in there, younger people. So basically all the bulk cooking she's responsible for or I'm responsible for. Between the two of us, you know, the--the 50 pounds of pork gets cooked every day. The 50 pounds of crawfish étouffée, all the bulk cooking is done by myself or Helen.

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These other people you're talking about; they come in and they'll put the baked chicken in the oven. They'll get the fryers turned on. They'll get the frozen vegetables in the pot. They'll get the potato salad made. Cooks--they're not cooks.

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RF: Tell me more about Helen. Did you know her for a while or did you hire her?

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DB: I've known Helen all my life. Way back when my partners wanted out I said Helen, do you want in? And she said yes. So she's--she's a partner. And, you know, as long as she's alive she'll get a piece of the action. She's been very good to me. She's a good person. She's good to everybody.

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RF: Where is she from or where does she call home?

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DB: She's from Broussard.

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RF: So she's an old family friend or acquaintance?

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DB: Yeah; well she's--you go back far enough everybody knew everybody in Broussard and she grew up, you know, like a lot of people back then--she grew up picking cotton, working in the fields. She went to work for the School Board and retired at the School Board--kitchen work 30 years or whatever if not longer. I remember I got her a job at another restaurant in Lafayette years and years ago and I remember the guying saying now Helen, if I hire you, you're not going to quit me? Well 20 years later I had to say Helen, you can quit him; it's okay. You don't have to work three jobs a day. And that's just the type of person she is.

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So she basically does this full-time.

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RF: Is Helen white; is she African American?

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DB: She is American. She's a black lady. I don't know how long--her family has probably been around as long as mine. I don't know her--her roots but I can imagine. Just good people; her--her brother has a restaurant in Broussard, a mentor of mine. I hung around him growing up a lot.

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RF: What is that restaurant called?

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DB: Norbert's. It would be another good story.

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RF: Right; and let's talk about on your menu you describe your food as Zydeco cooking. Can you say what that means?

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DB: Ah, I don't know what it means. It means string bean in French. I know what it doesn't mean. The rest of the world cannot call it Cajun and if they call it Zydeco they don't know what that means so they can't mimic it or screw it up or do anything with it. And really that's the only reason I went with the Zydeco 'cause I see Cajun, Cajun, Cajun, Cajun, and how much of it is--it has nothing to do with Cajun. And Zydeco implies to me more of the Creole, the black, and let's face it, I spent a lot of time in the kitchen with black women and black women back in the day could cook. That's all there was to it, you know. Nobody could cook a rice and gravy. My mother couldn't do it like them, like the few women I was familiar with.

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Where were we?

00:34:13

RF: Well we were talking about Zydeco and your dislike for the word Cajun or how it's used elsewhere.

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DB: Yeah; I mean Cajun doesn't imply anything derogatory to me. It's just the misuse of it. I think you said that. You know you go to Nashville; you get a gumbo in Nashville. Please, people; it's not a gumbo. It has nothing to do with a gumbo. You got a local guy here in Lafayette from Alexandria and they're serving a rice dressing. There is nothing in his rice dressing that has anything to do with rice dressing. It's not a rice dressing, you know. So I--I just--I wanted to--not monopolize but I wanted to brand it my own way. I wanted people to say wait; what's--what is Zydeco? You know, well you got to come here to find out. Obviously I'm Cajun; I kind-a talk like dat. I cook out of big black iron pots, you know. I'm five generation-Broussard, Louisiana. I mean that's the obvious part. So what's left; what's--the food is left you know.

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RF: Let's talk about the daily specials. You have one Monday through Friday?

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DB: I have what we call the daily special; each day we do something different on top of the whole menu, you know. If we have 15 things on the menu, each day we'll have one item

different. For example, my smothered rabbit is on Monday, you know. My beef short ribs is on Tuesday; stuffed pork chops--Wednesday and of course on Friday we have two or three different seafood--courtbouillion, shrimp and okra stew. But that started downtown--probably the reason I stayed open; everybody knew the smothered rabbit was on Monday. You know, so I could count on that day, you know. And then the turkey on Thursday, you know; people come in just for the turkey. On Wednesday they come in just for the chicken and okra--not everybody but people know that if they want some more chicken and okra it's Wednesday, and don't come here much after noon; 12:30 you're typically out of it.

00:37:08

So that was the idea is getting them in, getting some of that rush early, you know you can have an early rush and a late rush; that makes a good day. Just a late rush, the numbers might come out the same but it's a stressful day. So to spread that lunch out a little bit--

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RF: Do you get people whose favorite special that's that day do you get them calling and reserving? Do you allow that?

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DB: I get it: "Can you set me a shrimp and--chicken and okra aside?" "Yeah, we got it." I don't condone it [*Laughs*]; a lot of times we don't even answer the phone once we get busy, you know, so--. It's--it's hard not to take care of the people that are in front of you. I mean let's face it; they're here--take care of them.

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RF: Do you get people also who might come in for their favorite--let's say out, they came here a bit too late, do they--

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DB: Every day.

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RF: --do you find people leaving?

00:38:15

DB: No; they won't leave. They'll get something. I have a very big menu. They'll get something else, you know, after they finish complaining. But that's the idea of the special; get in early. And I'll--I'll--I'm on top of it. You know, if I see I got to go with more the next time I'll try to do that.

00:38:38

RF: Is there a most popular special that runs out earliest the most?

00:38:41

DB: If there was I would increase it so I wouldn't run out. That would have to be the rabbit 'cause I'm not going to cook more than a case of rabbit on a Monday. And--and I'm--I sell out of it.

00:39:02

RF: What's your favorite thing to cook here in the kitchen?

00:39:05

DB: Hmm.

00:39:09

RF: Or maybe to eat.

00:39:12

DB: Hmm. Catfish courtbouillion, served on top of fried catfish.

00:39:24

RF: Can you describe what that is--courtbouillion?

00:39:25

DB: Courtbouillion is a--typically a seafood dish. I happen to use catfish, fresh if possible, catfish bellies if possible. And I'll use shrimp and crawfish also, in it, to stretch it, to add a little more color to it so to speak. It's a tomato and--and roux-based gravy, cooked real long, a lot of onions and celery, a little lemon, and basically I'll throw my seafood in long enough just to get it cooked on top of rice.

00:40:20

It's probably a thicker courtbouillion than what you'll find most places. Yeah; well you can't find it anywhere but, you know, I grew up cooking. My mother cooked a very thin tomato courtbouillion.

00:40:37

RF: What makes it thicker? If you can say--if you can't say--.

00:40:41

DB: More roux and more tomato. *[Laughs]*

00:40:44

RF: And why do you use the bellies?

00:40:46

DB: The belly is a firmer meat; it's got a lot of flavor in it. And I don't like throwing them away.

It's typically not the part you're going to fry 'cause it's got--it's got a richer flavor in it.

00:41:05

RF: And yesterday you were describing to me where you get the catfish. Can you--?

00:41:11

DB: Oh, right now we're running--we're running pole lines. It's basically a 14--15 foot bamboo stuck into the side of the riverbank right at the drop-off, and as the water goes up and down with the tide these big catfish are waiting for fish and varmints and critters to come off the mud flats, so they're feeding up and down these drop-offs. You know, you can have a 20, 30, 40, 50-pound catfish pulling on that bamboo pole and he can't go anywhere 'cause the bamboo is at an angle. And nothing flexes like bamboo. I mean it's--God made that thing right.

00:42:01

So right now we have a lot of fresh catfish. I'm running lines instead of buying catfish.

00:42:07

RF: Hmm; can you tell us where that is in proximity to Lafayette?

00:42:11

DB: Yeah; it's south of Lafayette. It's off of Vermilion Bay, freshwater bayou area.

00:42:23

RF: So if--when you catch the catfish and when you take them off the pole, how long until they're being filleted and served in the restaurant?

00:42:35

DB: Well from the--from the pole--oh the next day, oh the next day. If not, right now I might sit on them a week, you know. We get them filleted, bagged, frozen; they might--might be in the freezer a week right now, which is pretty damn fresh.

00:43:01

RF: And this is seasonal?

00:43:02

DB: Oh yeah; the only reason I'm fishing catfish right now is 'cause the trout aren't biting.

00:43:08

RF: Ah, okay; when is the catfish season and then we'll talk about trout?

00:43:12

DB: The catfish season can really be year-round. **[Pause]**

00:43:25

RF: So we were just talking about catfish and you were telling us where it is. You said you're only farming catfish now because trout aren't in season. Do you serve trout here or is that for--?

00:43:37

DB: Oh no; no, I don't serve trout. I can't--it's a game fish. You got to have a license to--you got to buy it from a licensed wholesaler and I--I can't--I can't afford trout.

00:43:59

RF: Okay; so you--trout fishing is just something you enjoy?

00:44:03

DB: Oh yeah; it's a hobby of mine.

00:44:05

RF: And walking into T-Coon's you immediately, it's apparent that fishing and hunting are hobbies of yours. Can you talk about that?

00:44:18

DB: I don't think it's apparent that I hunt.

00:44:22

RF: Oh okay. *[Laughs]* Do you not hunt?

00:44:24

DB: Oh yeah; I hunt. I don't know how the trout pictures started. You know a customer comes in. They start talking about fishing. I'm like you want to go and boom, we'll have the trip of a lifetime. We'll take the pictures. So now I got a customer on the wall and then another one. So all these pictures are just customers or friends of mine that we've gone and--and limited out on 50 or 100 trout. And 99-percent of the cases there's no picture taken unless we limit out.

00:45:06

And the fact is most of these people never do that again in their life, so it's worthy of a picture. Now they can come in and show their buddy, "Look, look what we did." *[Laughs]* And that's where that comes from.

00:45:23

RF: Uh-hm; where do you take people out trout fishing?

00:45:26

DB: Vermilion Bay out of Cypremort Point.

00:45:31

RF: And do you have a record?

00:45:33

DB: A record?

00:45:33

RF: A record trout?

00:45:35

DB: Yeah; I've--I fished the Star Tournament which is the statewide three-month tournament. I won it a couple times, second place, record--these are eight-pound trout. Record--shew, they just wrote an article about me in the *Sportsman*. This author thought that these records were noteworthy that he brought to my attention. For example, nobody has won first and second place before.

00:46:18

RF: And you have?

00:46:19

DB: I have. Nobody has won two years consecutive, and I have. They're not records but I guess to me they're records. Somebody will break it. I'm sure I will break my record. **[Laughs]** It's not over with.

00:46:41

RF: So I'm--my father always took me out fishing and I'm a really bad fisherman. What's it take to be a good fisherman in South Louisiana?

00:46:50

DB: Well, the pond that you grew up on is the pond I grew up on. You wouldn't believe the fish we caught in that pond. What's it take? This attitude that you can be the best, I would say. Where does that come from? I'm sure mental illness or something but **[Laughs]**, you know, why do I catch big trout? I don't know; I mean this book--it features the 12 big trout fishermen of the State and the whole time I'm thinking, but I don't fish for big trout. I don't try to catch big trout. I just fish for trout and try to catch as many as I can, and I happen to catch big trout. So I'm not sure I understand it. I think they just need things to write about--and I'm talking about you.

00:48:08

RF: What's your favorite way to prepare trout at home?

00:48:12

DB: I like to dust it with my seasoning mix, which is just an all purpose--something Cajuns do, salt, pepper, salt, black pepper, red pepper, garlic, just a pan of olive oil or butter or half olive oil, half butter, a good medium hot fire and just sear it on both sides a minute, depending on how thick it is, no batter, no frying, just good old olive oil. You can't beat the flavor.

00:48:58

RF: And is this--the seasoning you're talking about is it the same one that's found her at T-Coon's?

00:49:03

DB: Yeah; The Stuff, The Stuff is what we call it 'cause we couldn't think of anything else to call it. I remember somebody would say well what if we called the stuff this? And I said, well if you call the stuff that then--so finally we just called it The Stuff.

00:49:21

RF: All right; and tell m about hunting and the role it plays in your life.

00:49:26

DB: It's not about hunting. And it's not about fishing. It's about getting out of this restaurant. Any reason to get out of the restaurant and, you know, you got to have something to do a couple days a week or this whole thing will consume you. [*Interruption.*]

00:49:49

RF: All right; so you were saying that fishing and hunting is about getting out of here, out of the restaurant?

00:49:55

DB: Look; I could quit fishing tomorrow. I could quit hunting tomorrow. It wouldn't phase me as long as I have something else to do. It is what it is brother; it's a way to get out of here,

something to challenge me, you know, just--something to set goals, something to--something else to do, something else to be good at.

00:50:23

RF: How often do you go hunting or fishing?

00:50:27

DB: Well we only have so many hunting days in the year so we try to go every day. *[Laughs]* Which doesn't happen, but, you know, if I fish or hunt three days a week that's probably a good average weather permitting. Hunting you need bad weather; we don't go when the weather is good. Fishing you need good weather; we don't go when the weather is bad. Three days a week is good. You got to understand; I don't work in the afternoon. I'm off every afternoon. So the real objective is to get out of here in the morning and afternoon, so that means when I'm here I got to get a lot of stuff done. All my ordering, all my prepping, all my--everything, if I got to cook, clean catfish, whatever I got to do, I got to do it and get out 'cause I got plans. So it's a way to keep me going quick, fast, make the time fly by.

00:51:38

RF: Do you have other family members that work here, children?

00:51:40

DB: Hell no.

00:51:43

RF: Why do you say that?

00:51:45

DB: You don't want family involved in business. I have an eight year old. It's so funny; the-- Sunday was the first day she came and actually did something constructive for any amount of time. We had 55 plate lunches going out for the Marines and she sat there and she did the dinner rolls. Now she dropped the plate; she mashed some dinner rolls but you know what--she did it. And that gave me an opportunity to explain to her that people that don't do anything don't drop plates. It's the people that do things that make mistakes.

00:52:30

She likes coming to work with daddy so she can go to Poupart's next door and decorate cakes and cupcakes. And she wants to turn T-Coon's into a bakery--next door to Poupart's Bakery. I said that doesn't really make sense. But anyway, that's going to be very interesting to see how the eight year old and the four year old, you know, get into the business or get out of it; we'll see.

00:53:01

RF: Are you going to encourage them to work or--in the business either as young people or when they're older?

00:53:12

DB: Encourage them? No; you--this isn't for anybody. It would be a hell of a coincidence that one or two of my children happen to want to be in this business. It would be a--it would be a hell

of a coincidence, 'cause it's just--the fact that they might grow up in it, you know, I'm sure that could play a big part. I know it will but unless they totally want it I don't wish this on anybody.

00:53:50

RF: And why is that?

00:53:52

DB: 'Cause it's the hardest business out there, especially the way other people do it--lunch and dinner every night. Please; what kind of life is that? If I had to do this at night I wouldn't do it. I'm fortunate that I can make it on breakfast and lunch--very fortunate. Thank God every day.

[Laughs]

00:54:23

RF: I want to ask a--before we end, I want to ask a local question. Lafayette and Southern Louisiana just suffered a--an oil spill within the past year and I want to know what effect that has had on your business, what you've seen, your customers many of whom I imagine work in the oil industry and the fishing industries?

00:54:54

DB: Well overall it's--it's really hurt our business. It's hurt my customers, which is, you know--I feel that. We're down tremendously. And now with food prices skyrocketing I'll lose more customers. I can't lose money. I'll just have to go up on my prices. But--and I've done that. You know when--when you got payroll going out and you don't have a penny to meet it, literally not

a penny in your checking account, you just got to do what you got to do. If you're going to stay in business you got to go up on your prices and you got to get those margins back. That catfish that I bought for \$3 a pound for years is now \$4 a pound--boom, 25-percent increase just overnight. And there's so many items like rice--20 pounds; I remember paying \$7 a 50-pound bag of rice. Now that's over \$20-bucks--for rice; we grow it right here. There's no reason for that.

00:56:16

But political as it is--it is what it is.

00:56:24

RF: And do your purveyors explain why something like catfish would rise 25-percent?

00:56:33

DB: No.

00:56:33

RF: Do they attribute it to the oil spill?

00:56:36

DB: No; I literally never talked to anybody. I do contract pricing. They have to buy the best they can buy 'cause they're--they're competitive. I got enough sense to know that they're doing the best they can do so they can get their margins. But I'm only being charged so much percentage above what they're buying it at 'cause of the pricing structure that we contracted. So I know if they're buying their--their meats--whatever meats do that's what it is plus the percentage.

Seafood--same thing; dry goods--same thing; canned goods--same thing. They go to the market that everybody is buying in. They buy what they can buy at the best price they can and I pay a certain percentage above that. So there's nothing to talk about. You just got to stay on your prices and--and make sure they're in line which I'm terrible at.

00:57:45

RF: Is this the biggest increase that you've seen or that your family has seen in all the generations of--of working in the food industry?

00:57:54

DB: I don't know about that. I know a few years ago we had a big increase in beef prices. You know still waiting for that to come down but it'll never come down. Nothing is going to go up and come down. I just don't see that. And maybe it will; I don't know. You know shrimp--these are the best prices on shrimp ever. You got a bunch of factors. Now everything is IQF, offshore, or on the boat. They're individually quick frozen right then. So you're not dealing with a fresh product, so that's a whole different market.

00:58:43

These products can go to market and bought and sold in volume, on the exchange, or whatever. You have the freshwater shrimp market, pond-raised; that's come into the scene. So that--we got better shrimp prices than we had 15 years ago. I just don't see beef prices coming down or--what's the reason catfish is so high? I don't know. The feed is high, you know. Is--is grain that high? Yeah; flour is up. Wheat is up. Will it come back down again? I don't know. I bet if it does the catfish prices doesn't. **[Laughs]** They'll just have a better margin and that's how

they make money. You know like gas prices at the pumps. You don't make money until the prices start going down. That convenience store can hold that price just a little longer as it comes down--'cause his competitor is doing the same thing. On the way up they're quick to change, so they can get more business. Anyway--

01:00:05

RF: Yeah; well do you think food--food culture is more important in South Louisiana to its people than other places you've visited or other people you've talked to?

01:00:17

DB: Well yeah; other people live to eat--we eat to live. Other people eat to live; we live to eat.

01:00:26

RF: And why do you think that is so in this region?

01:00:30

DB: I don't know; it started a long time ago. I know that. Maybe we had an abundance of it where other parts of the country didn't. It's always been a community effort. When it was time to slaughter pigs, everybody came together to do the work; everybody left with a piece. Cattle, there was no refrigeration to speak of, so a family couldn't sit on a whole hog. It would go bad. So they split it up and so it became a community--maybe not a community but it was shared amongst families. Probably how it all started; I mean who can do one up on the other one. *Taste this [Laughs]; next week--taste this.*

01:01:41

RF: And do you feel that way about your food?

01:01:42

DB: Oh yeah; I rule. When it comes to wild game I got that. Duck, deer, I'm doing some cooking videos and getting ready to start actually filming them. The first one is going to be, you know, brisket, pork roast, turkey, how to season and how to cut. Anybody can cook a brisket for example. A lot of people screw up when they go to cut it and slice it. But the--the second video-- and it's all to show how to season using The Stuff or some type of mix, seasoning mix. But the second one is going to be wild game. How to cook that front shoulder or that neck of a deer; how to cook the tenderloin and the roast, you know. So many people fill their freezers every year and they just--it goes to waste 'cause they really don't know how to deal with duck. How many people can't cook duck and they shoot hundreds of duck? What a waste. That duck should be moist, succulent, full of flavor--.

01:03:11

RF: Okay; well I want to thank you for this interview.

01:03:13

DB: Oh it's over?

01:03:14

RF: Well if there is anything you want to add?

01:03:18

DB: Who is reading this?

01:03:19

RF: Well it [*Laughs*]--.

01:03:21

[End David Billeaud Interview]