

DONALD BENDER
Mockingbird Bakery – Greenwood, MS

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Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
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[Begin Donald Bender Interview]

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Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, August 18, 2011. I'm in Greenwood, Mississippi, at TurnRow Books on Howard Street with Mr. Donald Bender. And Donald, if I could get you to state your name and what you do for a living for the record?

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Donald Bender: Hi, I'm Donald Bender, and I'm the head baker at the Mockingbird Bakery inside the Viking Cooking School. And my birthday is May 29, 1967.

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AES: Where are you from originally, Donald?

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DB: I'm from Oxford [Mississippi]. My dad was an Ole Miss [University of Mississippi] professor for thirty-eight years. And my wife [Martha Foose] and I moved down here to open a bakery with Viking [Range Corporation] about seven years ago. And the café has been taken out, and now I'm just a wholesale bakery with a small retail window that keeps me pretty busy.

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AES: In a nutshell, huh? So tell me how you got into baking originally.

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DB: I was a cook, and I was a line cook for fifteen years, and I had moved back to Oxford and saw all these businesses popping up by my friends and saw my friend, Cynthia Gerlach and Martha Foose opening the Bottletree [Bakery] in Oxford, and they gave me a job over there, but—even though I didn't have any baking experience. So Martha had worked at La Brea Bakery in Los Angeles, this great bakery, and she asked one of the bakers who worked there to come to Oxford for three weeks to show me how to bake. And he loved it so much, he ended up staying for three years, and I worked under him for three years at the Bottletree until I took over as head baker at the Bottletree, and then that's how I got started and then just working in small bakeries, moving around in New Orleans. We went and worked for Susan Spicer, and then we moved up to Minneapolis and worked for Whole Foods and a small bakery called Turtle Bread [Company], which is one of my favorite bakeries I've worked at and learned the most. So it's a lot of just hands-on training and—and learning everything while being paid, so that's—that was my lesson.

[Laughs]

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AES: When you first started baking at Bottletree, do you remember what that was like and kind of the learning curve of working with baked goods?

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DB: Oh, it was hard. Felipe [Flores] was my—my instructor, my maestro, and there was a big language barrier, first off, and he wanted, you know, everything to be perfect. And I was a line cook, so I had this hot temper, and it took a little while for us to get together and work things out. I could not roll a baguette to save my life, and he was real hard on me, but it was tough love.

And it was a challenge every single day to come in there and make that bread better and better every single day. And that's what I kind of really liked about it a lot was just being in the back and, you know, just trying to make your craft better and better and tastier and tastier every single day was a challenge—kind of a game.

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AES: Was there one thing that you would attribute to him that you learned from him?

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DB: Most of it was the shaping. The shaping is what I found out, teaching other people now, is the hardest—to train your hands that are not used to doing that, you know, instead of having a knife or a sauté pan in it, to using, you know, actually having your hands as the tools to shape the bread into different shapes. And some bakeries, you know, just have one or two shapes, and he was really big about having a lot of different shapes and changing it up, so you had a lot of different varieties to choose from. And that was always the biggest challenge: the shaping the bread. And Felipe was really great of showing me how to do that.

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AES: And tell me how the—the transition from being a line cook to being a baker and the different time of day and working—really it's a very solitary way of working.

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DB: Very. You know, for the longest time I worked from three to eleven at night, being a line cook, so, you know, you're off until—you know, you're still buzzing from the night before and

you can't sleep until two or three in the morning, to switching that over to getting up at three o'clock in the morning and going to work. But it was great because I loved, you know, drinking coffee and getting started and then also going home before anybody else did. So that was always a big thing of—of being done first and—and also I'm a big nap taker, so with bakeries, that's a good thing. You know, it's the fountain of youth. **[Laughs]**

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AES: Well and tell me, too, because I know just from hearing about you at Bottletree that you—you were very innovative there and you're known for your breakfast sundae. Tell us about that and other things that you came up with at Bottletree.

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DB: Oh, that was fun. You know, Oxford is a fun college town and you could—you could do that there. You couldn't do it as much in Greenwood, don't have—we don't have the space to do that, but the Southern Sundae was fun. It was just a biscuit in a cup, and then you'd choose three different gravies, you know, the tomato gravy or the sausage gravy or the red-eyed gravy. And I just made these buttermilk biscuits, and you just crush it up and put it in the cup. And then you had different side items, like if you wanted toppings like a sundae, it would be cheddar cheese or bacon or roasted garlic or bacon, you know, just—. It was kind of formatted after, you know, an ice cream sundae to a Southern biscuit-gravy sundae.

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And that was fun. And then we did—**[Pause]**. Yeah.

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AES: Well, would you—when you—you started baking, did you know immediately that it was something that you just kind of knew you were in the zone with and you wanted to stay—stay with?

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DB: Well, that was the good thing about being a cook for so long, and I was a burnt-out cook; I was just, you know—just didn't see myself following the cooking path and—and so learning the baking and then putting the two together has really helped my baking. You know, instead of—if you were just a baker and you wanted to—most of my breads that sell the most are sundried tomato basil and green olive and garlic and potato and rosemary. The things that you add to the bread and how you make those things to put it in the bread makes a big difference.

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And being a cook before, I would roast my garlic for two hours instead of just putting in, you know, pureed garlic or onions or things like that, so—. Combining the cooking and the baking, you know, it took a long time. I've been baking for fifteen years now, and it's still a challenge every day, but I feel that I'm consistent and that's a hard thing being a baker to do is—is being very consistent.

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But yeah, being a cook and a baker at the same time, I'll never probably go back to cooking again. But it—it helped me learn a lot with baking and making breads better.

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AES: When you—when you think about bread and you dream about bread what comes to mind?

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DB: Most of my first dreams of—of bread were timers and things being burnt and it was nightmares of just waking up thinking I had left something in the oven, or making the sourdough and I didn't put the sourdough back in the walk-in and I just had this—these thoughts of the dough coming out of the baskets and it was all over—poof—and we'd have to throw it all away after we've worked twenty-four hours on it. So those kinds of nightmares happen.

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But just for—for good dreams, it's just having the perfect bake, having everything go in the oven at the right time; everything is coming out at the right time. Just that whole satisfaction of having a good bake can really, you know, plan your whole day. If it's a bad bake and things go wrong, it's just going to be a bad rest of the day. But if it's a good bake, nothing can go wrong. It's a great day, then.

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AES: And when you're thinking about kind of new breads that you want to make and new challenges that you want to give yourself, how often does that happen and how do those ideas come to you?

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DB: I like to use, you know, seasonal things. I change, you know, and Christmas time we'll start doing the—or in fall, we'll do wild rice bread. That's a big hit here—everywhere actually, but it's my take on the wild rice bread. And in the more Christmas breads like the Christmas Stollen and changing it up. In summertime I do—which has been real popular, the lemon—lemon zest and fresh thyme and sundried tomato basil, so using things that are seasonal and getting things at

the [Downtown Greenwood] Farmers' Market that I can put in the bread that is local helps, and it makes me feel better and it also is a great selling point to the customer and talking to them and saying, "Yeah, I got this basil, you know, right from—from my next door neighbor who is selling it at the Farmers' Market." And it ties it all into together and people are interested in trying it.

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So, you know, buying a loaf of bread is like four dollars, and it's a pretty cheap investment that you can have all week and do different things with, so—. But trying new breads, I get inspired by going to other bakeries or looking in cookbooks, in bread books. I don't actually follow a recipe, but I'll see how they've used ingredients in their breads, and that sparks an idea for me to use it. And then it's my own recipe, and it's my own thing. I just get inspired by other people's—what they do and, you know, these people are going to Europe and I don't get out very much, so it's nice to get an influence of other people's breads and then trying to do my take on it.

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AES: Do you have a personal favorite out of everything that you make?

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DB: Sourdough, probably, is still my favorite bread just because it takes the longest to make. You—we—it's—I use my sourdough starter that I started eight years ago from grapes, so there's no yeast in it. I mix it and shape it one day, and then I put it in the walk-in cooler and let—and let it ferment and proof and then I bake it off the next day, so it's a two-day process. And it was really hard to make sourdough in a small town like this. It took a long time for it to start working,

and I wasn't going to change it. People wanted it softer and not so crispy, and I wanted to keep it at the same way I had been making it for years. And then it came around, and now it's my most-selling bread. If—it just goes to show you that if you stick to it long enough, it'll—it will turn and people will start liking it and get used to it.

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AES: Kudos for you for keeping it the way you wanted to. So we're here to talk about this Farmers' Market, which is like kind of the general purpose of us being here today, but I want to talk about Greenwood and how this town has changed since y'all got here. What were you doing just prior to starting Mockingbird Bakery here in town?

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DB: We had moved—my wife was homesick. She's from a farm outside of Yazoo City where she grew up [Pluto Plantation], and we were living in Minnesota, and she was homesick for the South. So we moved back home, and we moved into her grandmother's house that had been vacant for fifteen years. So we started fixing the house up and living on the farm, and I worked on the farm for a year, and that was pretty tough. And Greenwood was only forty-five minutes away.

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So Martha got the job with Viking, first with the Cooking School and then Fred Carl, the owner of Viking, asked if we wanted to put a bakery downtown across from the Alluvian Hotel. So we came up here and looked at the plans, and we got to choose our own equipment and do whatever we wanted to do, and he just backed us up on it. And we moved up here after just a year on the farm. And it's been great.

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AES: Had you been to Greenwood at all before y'all came up here to work?

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DB: Not too much. Just maybe passing through. After I had known Martha, I'd come through Greenwood, but being in Oxford, I never came really down to the Delta very much. So it was all kind of new to me, and this is the first town I've lived in that it wasn't a college town; it was, you know, a company town that was kind of changing from cotton over and it was a Viking town, so there was lots of possibilities and it was small, which we liked a lot, and so that was—that was fun.

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AES: Was that—what year was that—that you opened the bakery, 2004? 2005?

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DB: That sounds right: 2004, I think. And we've been there seven years now through all kinds of stuff. What's—what's kept me really good is I do all the wholesale for all the restaurants in town. I have about five accounts, which keep me really busy, and some of these restaurants are open seven days a week. And I'm only working five days a week, so I have to make the bread up for the two days that I'm off. So the wholesale accounts—and then what I have left over I sell on my retail counter, so there's no waste. And then bakeries, it's—there's a lot of waste. Even though there's a big profit margin on bread, you just don't want to waste it, and there's not too

many things you can do after it sits around for too long. So having the wholesale and the retail gives me twice as much chance to sell it.

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And then the Farmers' Market, that gives me another day to sell it on Saturdays, so then on Monday I just—I'm completely out of bread again and then start all back up back on Monday again.

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AES: So you were talking about how with your sourdough, how that was kind of a learning curve for a town like Greenwood to get used to artisan breads. If you were to tell the story of Greenwood in the past eight years and how it's changed, like what—how did the community turn around to your bread? How did that happen?

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DB: Hmm. Well first, you know, all the menu—on the Mockingbird menu was our sandwich breads, so all the sandwiches were on our breads, and that's what got the people hooked first. So every—you know, our Semolina bread that people have never had before, that was our Panini sandwich bread and people went crazy over it. They wouldn't buy it on the retail counter, but they loved the sandwiches from it. And then just in the last couple years they started buying it to make at home now, so that's—that was a great, significant change.

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And then holidays were always big because people had gotten holiday breads in the past or—so I would—you know, people would ask me if—could I make this certain bread, and if I had time, I would try it and make it for them. You know, like fruit-nut breads and cinnamon

bread and things like that. So the holidays got me really busy and trying to be consistent and always, you know, making the orders right has brought people back because, like, say, Oxford, you have a four-year change of students and faculty are always changing. These people live here all the time, so sometimes if you mess an order up, they're not coming back. And so that's— that's a big thing of just being consistent and talking to the people and trying to make what they want but also sticking to your guns and saying that you're going to make, you know, your breads how you were taught and how you want it to be first.

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AES: Was it hard to kind of convince people that it was worth investing in a good handmade loaf of bread?

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DB: Oh, yeah. I try a lot to tell the people that I don't use a lot of fats and shortenings and butters in the breads. And, which a lot of people are used to; everybody is used to, you know, the Bunny [brand] bread, the soft loaves of bread, and I like those breads too sometimes, and then they last, you know, a week or two. But then telling them that my breads only have like four ingredients in it and cutting out all the butter and using more time and folding processes with the bread to increase the shelf life of it gets to people and they—they want to know what's going in their bodies much more now. And I've noticed that with the Farmers' Market about people eating fresher and more local—that people want to know what's going in and what it is and not a bunch of preservatives and conditioners in the breads—that just keep it really simple. Simple sells.

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AES: Hear, hear. So with this kind of evolution of the renaissance of Greenwood and revitalization and restaurants in the bookstore and having an outlet, wholesale outlet for bread and—and that whole change, what do you think—because it seems like—I’m complicating this really badly but like Greenwood is kind of like a microcosm of the rest of the world, where people, like you were saying, are getting more health conscious and looking at what they’re eating and thinking about it more and wanting more handmade food and wanting it to be local and all of that. And how a place like Greenwood illustrates that and, I guess, let’s just have a simple segue to the Farmers’ Market. And the Farmers’ Market started in what year?

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DB: I think this is the fifth year—fourth or fifth year this is going to be going on now, so and it starts in—starts in May to September now and they’ve increased the months, and they’ve increased the vendors. There’s probably—excuse me—eight to fifteen vendors every Saturday out there doing it. And it’s not, you know—it’s not any arts and crafts; it’s all food. It’s all local farmers. It’s little businesses that are trying to just get started and mom-and-pop places like me.

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AES: Do you know much about kind of the energy that was behind getting the Farmers’ Market established and that inspiration?

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DB: Well I know Carol Puckett and Jamie and Kelly Kornegay were big of getting the Farmers’ Market started at first. And they recruited everybody, and they got the spot. It’s at the end of

Howard—Howard Street, yeah, in the old railroad depot parking lot. And they—they started it and they called me up and asked if I would start selling breads on Saturday, and I said I would. And I just got to be really good friends with the vendors next to me [Alisa and Brenda Lay of 2 Sisters in the Kitchen], and we always, you know, we always park our tents next to each other and talk and chat and stuff, so—.

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They got me on the second year. I didn't do it the first year, and then they got me on the second year, and we've been doing it for the last four years after that.

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AES: So tell me about that, for the community, what it's meant to have a Farmers' Market.

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DB: Well it's been really great for me, since I don't get to see very many people. I work from four until noon or one, so I'm home. If you're not buying the bread before I leave, I just come back in the morning and see the bread gone and—and don't know who bought it or anything. So when I see the people on Saturdays, I actually get to talk to them, which is great. I was a little shy at first, you know, just being a little shopkeeper at the Farmers' Market and talking to people, but it's been a great experience of talking to people and finding out what they like and seeing the breads—how they sell. I mean they could just walk to the [Viking] Cooking School and still buy the bread, but they go down to the Farmers' Market. And then it's fun because then they can go buy a fresh tomato and then they can go next door and buy some pickled beets or things from the canning ladies. And then buy a loaf of bread and just all take it home in one big shot and make a meal out of it.

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AES: Tell me about your sausage biscuit that you sell.

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DB: That's been a good thing. We've been doing this—this buttermilk biscuit and I've been adding cheddar and chives and a little roasted garlic to them, and we started out doing like thirty sausage biscuits. We get the sausage from Pontotoc [Mississippi], and it's—it's a great sausage biscuit. We use this white cheddar and we use the chives that they—we sell at the Farmers' Market that we use, and we started with like thirty sausage biscuits, and now we're doing sixty, and if I'm late on a Saturday morning, the people are crowding around my car, trying to get these sausage biscuits. So I can't even eat them anymore because they're—they're really good, but I've been making them for the last seven years and it's a fun thing to make. It's something you don't have to proof and—and it's opposite from all the other slow-rising breads that I make that you can just whoop up a pan of biscuits real quick and put some sausage on them and wrap them in tinfoil and sell them really quick. So that's been a—a fun thing.

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And we also have been selling them in our little retail counter, and it gives people a chance that—who just don't get one on Saturdays that they can get it Fridays and Saturdays at the Cooking School now.

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AES: And you told me before that somebody from Viking goes peddling them around the Viking Corporate Offices in the morning?

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DB: Well our manager, Becky Thompson, had this great idea of why don't I do like thirty or forty sausage biscuits, and she will take them down to the Front Street Viking offices, the corporate offices, and just go through there through all the cubicles and see if anybody wants a sausage biscuit. Well, we sent her down there with thirty biscuits and a basket, and she came back in twenty minutes and sold out.

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So every week we've been increasing the order, increasing them, and now we're doing a chicken—a chicken biscuit on the cheddar-chive biscuit, and we're doing the sausage and we're selling maybe sixty to seventy every Friday morning now, so that's turned into a—kind of a big thing.

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AES: How much does a sausage biscuit go for?

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DB: They're three dollars now. They were two dollars and they—since I'm putting so much into it now, we've moved it up to three dollars, but it's a—it's a meal. You're—you can skip lunch after this biscuit, so—. [*Laughs*]

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AES: You were saying you just whoop up a batch of biscuits, but I know people would kill or die for that recipe. Can you talk a little bit about how you came up with that?

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DB: Sure. I was—I worked at the Windsor Court in New Orleans, this great hotel, and I worked for a guy, he was from Honduras, and we made all the biscuits and scones for the—for the hotel. And this is a biscuit that he had—had and it's a great recipe because they're—it's not a wet biscuit. You know, it's a soft all-butter biscuit, not shortening, just straight butter and you can cut them out into squares or triangles, and it's just not a messy biscuit. It's not a biscuit that you, you know, you spoon out on a pan. It's not a wet drop biscuit. You know, it's just a great cutout biscuit. So, and you can make them in advance. You can freeze them ahead of time and then bake them. All the restaurants I do little mini biscuits. They do sliders and things with them. I mean we sell them for Christmas in—in the little Mockingbird pans at different sizes, so it's a great recipe and I'm going to have to hold it on—hold onto it for now though.

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AES: Well I think I heard—even heard tell that somebody has a tattoo of that recipe.

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DB: Oh, I don't know. I think I've seen—there's a friend of mine that has a recipe of a—on his arm, tattooed on his arm. It's—and it's kind of like torn like in a recipe book would be, so you can't really read the whole recipe. And I've seen a bunch of whisks involved on tattoos. But, yeah, it's not a hard biscuit. You know, I would—I would show anybody how to do it, you know. It's—to pass the biscuit along and then it's fun to add things to it. You can add—Nancy Silverton has a great scone recipe that's more like a biscuit of a shitake mushroom onion scone

that would be great inside of a biscuit. So there's lots of different things you can do with the biscuit too, to make it different and your own.

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AES: And you were talking earlier about getting ideas and ingredients from your fellow vendors at the Farmers' Market. Before the Farmers' Market, how were you getting those ingredients and how did that change?

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DB: Well being in Greenwood, we just have our local purveyors like Sysco and US Foods. So most of the time, that's how we would get our stuff. The chives might come from Mexico. The basil, you know, would come from California. You wouldn't know how it was going to be. You didn't know how long it was going to be packaged there. So that was a—that was a big challenge of—of getting the stuff. And now, you know, every Saturday and—and also we have—we're lifelong friends now these—the other merchants at the Farmers' Market because I don't have to wait every Saturday. I mean I can call these guys up and—and go out to their gardens and they'll have extra—. Yesterday, Mike [McClelan], who sells greens and herbs at the Farmers' Market had some extra basil that he was trimming down for his patch and gave me all the—maybe two pounds, four pounds of basil, and I put that in my sundried tomato bread today. So not—you know, he gave that to me for free, and then at Sysco it's probably eighteen dollars a pound for fresh basil. So you can see how much, you know, they're charging for something that's not even local. So it's not a—it's not even really an option to really even get something more expensive. I would rather get something cheaper and local any time.

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AES: How would you say that's changed your end product?

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DB: Oh, great. You know, it—it gives something to—to talk about, you know. We sell the breads over at Giardina's [Restaurant], and they're a fine-dining restaurant and it gives the waiters and waitresses something to talk about when they say, you know, "This is Donald's, our baker's, across the street—bread that he gets all his ingredients from the Farmers' Market," and it's just a great selling point. And it makes it, you know, their own instead of something that came off a truck or something that came from a bakery far away, so—.

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AES: And how do you think the people who come here from out of town respond to that? I imagine they're fairly surprised to know that stuff like that is going on here in Greenwood.

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DB: That's been fun to talk—you can—you can spot people from out of town quickly here now. So it's always fun to—and they love it; they love to come down and get a nice loaf of ciabatta, you know or—or take it with them and say that they came to Greenwood and saw all the fun stuff and came to the bookstore and—and end up bringing home a loaf of bread. And people are—probably aren't thinking that you came to—come to Greenwood and get a European-style loaf of bread.

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So that's been fun and—and talking to people and, you know, how they have their local bakery or they just lost a local bakery, and it's been bought up by a chain or something and you know that's—just having good conversations and talking to people—.

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AES: How does that work with the conversations with the vendors at the Farmers' Market whose ingredients you use? Like what do they think about you repurposing their product in your own way?

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DB: Oh, it sells for them, too. I make—the granola; I never thought granola would be a big hit down in Greenwood, and it took a long time. You know, especially, you could tell people that you put it over your ice cream and then they love it, and they eat it up. But I sell my granola to Brenda [Glenn] and Alisa [Lay of 2 Sisters in the Kitchen], and they make little muffins, so they started using my granola and putting it in their muffin mix and selling the muffins at the Farmers' Market and they just get to tell the people—you know, I'm the—I'm one of the biggest sellers at the Farmers' Market. And so it's fun. So they can say, “Hey, this is Donald's granola in my muffins,” so the people buy them right up, too, then. So that's kind of fun.

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AES: And there is no, like—it's just kind of like a healthy neighborly collaboration and not any competition?

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DB: Right. Totally. It's—we're all friends there. We're all just, you know, trying to have fun and pass some time away, and we all trade things at the end of the Farmers' Market day. You know, if I have a little leftover bread, I'll trade it for, you know, a bag of mixed greens or go down to Spooney's and see if he wants to trade some rolls for a barbecue sandwich or something on my way home. Or some watermelon. So that's been really fun. I mean we're all just big friends down there.

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AES: Are there some stories that come to mind that you can share about your mornings at the Farmers' Market?

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DB: Well, it's hot. It's super, super hot. It's in a hot parking lot. They have a revitalization project going on downtown. They're going to plant some trees and a little garden, and they're going to put the Farmers' Market on there. Maybe not next year but the year after, so that—that gives a lot of hope for that. And we thought about changing the—not me, but as a group—thought about changing the location of the Farmers' Market but being right on the railroad tracks, it's kind of great for everybody to come to. It's not just one side of town. It's—it's just right there in the middle that everybody can come to. It's real convenient. But we've had some really hot days out there, and we've been praying and doing rain dances waiting for us to—you know, just to get rained out and get to go home. And, you know, we've brought coolers of beer up there; that's been kind of fun to sit around—because it is my day off, so I'm used to having a beer before noon sometimes, so—. *[Laughs]*

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But it's just a good local bunch, you know. They're—we bring our kids down there sometimes and the kids all play, and sometimes there's music down there, which is a lot of fun, some live music. And we have a guy that comes down and face paints to try to get the kids to come and they put tables and chairs out there, so you just don't come and buy your stuff and leave. You can kind of come and hang out and make a sandwich right then and there or—or get your produce and talk to the farmers about how you made these beautiful tomatoes, these heirloom tomatoes or how did you get your eggplant to look like this. And a lot of trade secrets are going on too, so that's kind of fun.

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AES: Are there some people—I mean you say that you see Mike the greens guy outside of the Market. Are there other people that you see outside of the Market or—or run into?

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DB: I see them. You know, they come into the bakery, you know, and buy things, you know. If I—sometimes if I give a loaf of bread away, it brings back two loaves of bread, so some—which works really good, you know. If one of the—one of the vendors down there was interested in one of the multi-grain breads that I make for—with raisins and they want to try it, I'll give it to them and then I'll see them the next day, and they'll want to buy two more.

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So I see them sometimes at the Farmers' Market but otherwise, I think everybody is just working during the week, and we just kind of run into each other on Saturdays and catch up.

00:32:02

AES: Now I saw Spooney [Kenter] earlier today, and we were talking about him having—probably, more than likely, being the only barbecue guy in a Farmers’ Market in the state of Mississippi, I venture to guess. Can you speak to that and how kind of—because, you know, I’ve also visited the Market at the beginning of the season and was commenting on how unique it is because you could get a free puppy and barbecue and bread and blueberries and chow-chow at the [Downtown] Greenwood Farmers’ Market. I mean it’s like quite a cornucopia of offerings. And does that ring true to you, or do you just kind of see it as just a regular small-town market?

00:32:36

DB: Well, being he has the only hot food there, it’s a big draw because a lot of people are wanting, you know, it’s—it’s early in the morning. Usually everybody tries to get out there early before it gets too hot. And Spooney is over there just smoking that grill up and making everybody hungry for lunch. So when everybody gets their produce and their—their canned stuff and everything, then they can go to Spooney’s and buy a rack of ribs and—which is kind of fun. And then, you know, it’s fun for us vendors, too, because after we’re—after it’s over we can go over there and try to see what he has got left over. So it is fun having Spooney there; he’s been there from the very beginning, and it’s great having him there. It is unique. I’ve been to a few other farmers’ markets, and I didn’t see barbecue on their—on their list of things, so—

00:33:23

And we’ve made—I’ve made—we’ve—we’ve had a little deal together. Spooney does the River to Rails Festival in—in Greenwood, so I’ve made buns for him, little slider buns for his barbecue sandwiches before and that was, you know, it’s turned into jobs, too, having him there also.

00:33:45

AES: Oh, little collaborations, I like that. So, given that you've been a part of the Market for four or five years, something, are there—do you still get locals who come up to you and are kind of curious and don't really know what your bread is all about and what it means to pay five dollars for a loaf of bread?

00:34:00

DB: Yeah. I tell them—you know, I have a—we finally have a list put out at the Viking Cooking School. Since we don't put the ingredients on the labels of the bread, we have a poster board that we put all the breads on and all the ingredients and all the breads, so in case there's any allergies or anything like that, people can know, you know, what—what's in the breads and stuff, so—. I forgot the question.

00:34:28

AES: If—if local people come and are still being introduced to your breads for the first time, like people who aren't used to European-style breads and you having to like—like after all these years of being part of the Market, do you still have to explain your product?

00:34:43

DB: Not as much. You know, getting—from the [Alluvian] hotel we get a lot of—a lot of tourists and people who are just traveling through Greenwood and checking it out. They'll come to the Farmers' Market just to see because everybody at the hotel tells them to come down and check it out and walk around and see. And they're usually not buying produce or vegetables because they're staying at the hotel, and they're traveling. But they'll buy a loaf of bread and

take it up to their room so they can just kind of have it. Or it's really great, you know, if they're traveling through and they can buy it for a house guest; it's a great present just to bring over to a house, you know, that you're staying with or—or your visitors and company.

00:35:23

So when I see them, I'll tell them that it's real simple; you know, all the bread is made by my hands. It's all made with sourdough starters and *levains* that—and *poolishes* [different kinds of fermented starters] that put a lot of time in the bread, so I mean I'll give them a quick description, but they're sold once they see it and—and once I talk to them a little bit about it.

00:35:46

AES: So having had this experience in Greenwood over the past almost ten years, how would you say your business has changed the most, baking in Greenwood?

00:35:58

DB: Well, you have to change a little bit. What I have found out in other bakeries when they make the *boule*, which are French for round balls is actually what *boule* stands for, or free-shaped bread like *batards*, most of my breads sell better and I've had to change a little bit of the shape. So most of my breads sell better in loaf pans, so I'll make the breads normally that I've made round- or torpedo-shaped, I'll put them in a loaf pan and they sell much better, just that shape and it fits in a toaster and that just that idea of, you know, loaf pan bread. You know, they can—they can see that and see using that more than, you know, a European-shaped bread that's, you know, kind of oval or weird to make sandwiches with or how to try. So that little strategy has kind of worked pretty good from a—and they freeze really well. And I tell people that after it's sliced, the bread lasts for six months in the freezer fine. So that's a good selling point with

the—and talking to people face-to-face that I couldn't just catch, you know, at the retail counter, if I don't see them, I can tell them that and that helps sell the bread, too.

00:37:18

AES: What about—when was the transition from Mockingbird as a full-service restaurant to the Mockingbird like wholesale kitchen bakery?

00:37:25

DB: It was about three years ago, and the [Viking] Cooking School moved—they were expanding, so they just kind of—this is like three years ago and they took out the kitchen that was for the café of the Mockingbird and the dining room and put a cooking kitchen, a demonstration kitchen in the front and expanded their—all their cookware and their food items also into the—. So they just got bigger and I still have—I'm just kind of boxed off in the back. I've never changed or moved. And they put a big window up, so everybody can kind of watch me like a zoo animal, so that's kind of fun, I guess, for some people. *[Laughs]*

00:38:10

AES: Well that's what I was kind of getting to was that if kind of the performance of baking bread has—has equaled more sales.

00:38:19

DB: It could. I don't know if it would help, seeing me back there covered in flour, to buy a loaf of bread, but they do see that I'm doing it with my hands and it's not coming off a baguette rolling machine or it's not coming out of a box that we're just par-baking, you know. People are

seeing—they're—they're putting the baker to the bread, and I'm a pretty healthy guy, too. So they know that—that I'm, you know, also eating this bread and—too, and a lot of people ask me if I will make different breads for them and—and if I—what's my favorite bread and what breads do I like the most, and I like them all. And I only make breads that I like to make and like to eat myself, so some of the breads that are sweet breads or—or sticky things I don't really—I don't really get into making because I just don't eat that kind of bread mostly so—.

00:39:11

AES: Now how—I think you may have mentioned this before but about how many loaves do you turn out a week?

00:39:17

DB: Week? Probably during the day I probably make over, oh, 120 loaves a day, and then on Fridays it's my busy day because I'm stocking up all the restaurants and the Farmers' Market, and we're really busy at the Cooking School on Saturdays, so on Fridays I'll make 250 loaves. And I have a helper who comes in and helps me slice that bread, and we have a bread slicer and bag it and put a label on it. So that's—that's a big day. So it's probably, I'll say, go through about 800 pounds of flour a week. And you can probably make fifty loaves of bread out of one bag of flour so it's probably—I couldn't even count. I'd have to think about it someday but it's—I'd say 500 loaves a week, maybe, sounds about right.

00:40:11

AES: That's a lot of bread, Donald.

00:40:13

DB: *[Laughs]* It's a lot of work. It's fun work though and it's—it's a challenge to make that bread consistent that if someone is coming through and they wanted to—and they had that *ciabatta*, say, last year, and they come back it's going to be the same *ciabatta* or—or better. You know, it's going to—being consistent is something, you know, it's kicked in my OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder] a little bit and I'm—I love tasks that are like that—that are—that you follow and techniques and things. So it's been fun, though.

00:40:47

AES: So did you ever think that when you started working at Bottletree that you'd be here this much later?

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DB: I had no idea. Some day, you know, I'd like to have my own little bakery, but that's a lot of work, too, and I don't have to do any of the business end of it, you know, since I'm annexed in with Viking. They have people that, you know, help me out and do all the labeling and the—and the bill paying and stuff so that just makes me get to have just more hands-on bread. So I'm in there for just eight hours a day, but it's all about bread. There's no office time or anything, so that's been a big help.

00:41:25

AES: Is there anything that you haven't done, as far as bread is concerned, that you want to do or look forward to doing?

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DB: The one niche in my armor is pastry and I—I've—when Martha and I worked together, I made all of her doughs, but I would never do the finished products of it. I would never finish the croissants or the brioche, so that has been a little thing that I would like to know more about, you know just—. I know I could sell a lot of croissants here in town, especially over the holidays, but just, you know, if I'm going to make a croissant, I want to make it for a month or so, so I'm consistent with it and it's the same and not changing around different sizes and flavors and—and techniques that I can get it down. So that has—and I've never wanted to be a cake decorator, so I know that's always in the bakery field. And I've had to turn jobs down, and they've turned me down also because I wasn't a full, rounded baker. I'm just a bread baker, so having, you know, the—I can do some muffins and cookies and things like that, but being a full pastry chef, I'm not. That's why it was great having Martha with me because she could do all the things I couldn't do, and I could do all the things she couldn't do, and it was a really good teamwork plan.

00:42:44

If I ever did open a bakery again it would be with a pastry chef and not me doing it, though.

00:42:52

AES: What about passing on your baking skills? Have you taught anyone and especially maybe your son, Joe, how to bake?

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DB: Hmm. He's—he's asked. He's come in there a few times to roll pizza crust out and have fun, but I've told him that I don't want him to be a baker or even in the restaurant business just because it's just hard work. And you know it's—it's twelve months a year. You know, a lot of my friends are out having summers off, and I always thought being a—a teacher's kid that everybody had summers off, until I got into the restaurant world and see that, you know, you have to work all the time. And even at the holidays we're even busier, so it kind of puts a crimp on holidays when you're the one who is busy and tired, you know, for Christmas and Thanksgiving and stuff. But—but I've taught a lot of people, and they've ended up being better bakers than I have. So that's kind of funny. I don't understand like scoring the bread and cutting the bread. I've taught a lot of people how to do it, and I'm not the best scorer on breads. But I've taught other people, and they've turned out to be better than I am, and I don't know how they do it.

00:44:02

But—but I would love for someone to come in to—to learn a little bit more. I have someone that comes in that just helps me do the prep and things but I don't have a—you know, a protégé or an assistant who wants to actually take it over. I think they're kind of scared of the whole idea of coming in at three o'clock in the morning, and it does sacrifice a little bit of life to do that but, you know, I'm also leaving at noon, so I'm trying to show the perks of having this also. But I'm ready for a little helper to come around, and we could do this together. I'd be willing to show anybody how to do it. *[Laughs]*

00:44:41

AES: All right. Well I have—I feel like the bookstore is going to be closing here in a minute. I don't know why, but those church bells got me nervous. But we can wind this up and get you

home to your family. But, back to the Farmers' Market real quick, do you kind of see staying with that for the long haul and—and see some kind of visions in the future of you with the Farmers' Market and what that will be ten years from now?

00:45:05

DB: I hope someone is always going to be there—part of the bakery. The—having the bakery there just kind of ties all the other vendors there, you know. It brings—the bread brings a lot of people there also, so once they're there to buy their loaf of bread or their sausage biscuit, they can run over and buy a bag of tomatoes or—or something like that. So I hope—I'm not working every Farmers' Market because it's my day off, so I'll make all the bread for it and then we have volunteers to run it, but it does help out that—when I am there because they want to, you know, they want to meet the baker and they want to know what's in it from me. And I found that out the hard way, you know, they do want me there every Saturday. And it's hard to be there every Saturday, but I hope it's going to be going on for a long time. I—I think it has a lot of strength to do that.

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AES: This is kind of a bigger question, but—or definitely a bigger question but, you know, the Delta being known for cotton and catfish and now this—with consumer education and people wanting to know about—more about their food and food access and all these different political issues that are tied up in growing food and consuming food and how there's kind of, you know, a new—a new story for the Delta. And these small-scale farmers and Farmers' Markets and people getting more of an idea of the agricultural possibilities of the Delta and educating about—educating people about that, how do you see—where do you see your role in all of that?

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DB: Well I can see, you know, having farmers in my wife's family, and seeing that it's always cotton and corn and catfish in the—I can see them making more things with all this good land that will, you know—broccoli or—or vegetables and—and things like that and having the bakery just goes to show, you know, it shows the customers at the Alluvian and Giardina's that we get our bread from Donald, our baker, so it kind of shows them that we make all our own stuff from scratch.

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And if you're going to make your own bread, then you're going to make all your own things in your kitchen also, and that's a big—I think that's a big thing for the consumer and customer to see that. You want to know that the people are going a little extra to make your meal start from the bread basket all the way to the desserts, and a lot of the customers here, I'm sure, since I've been here seven years, if you traded out some of the breads for different store-bought breads, I think there would be a revolution or something because people are adamant about their bread around here now. And I think also that inspires people to make their own bread. I make pizza crusts that are a big seller and I've had people—and I'll tell—I'll give them a recipe or I'll show them a book that I got my recipe from and they're making pizza—pizza dough at home now.

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So that's fun and—and for their kids to have and so I think being part of, you know, farmers are slow, you know, slow—a slow process to make these—these things happen and so is a bakery and they have mutual respect for each other. And I would love to start growing some

wheat and trying out Mississippi Delta wheat. That would be maybe the next phase in all this too, so I'd be excited about trying that.

00:48:36

AES: Cool. And what would you say to people who hadn't been to Greenwood before and telling them what's going on here and—and what to look for and where to go?

00:48:49

DB: Well it's a down—fun downtown. They've just done so much work down here. They just redid the streets with this grant and re-bricked it, and it's all historical. The hotel is awesome. It brings in so many people. And the Cooking School, it brings people into take cooking classes and they spend the night at the hotel, and then you have this great bookstore here, which I sell all the bread to and they have a café upstairs. So it all works together. Like, if you're staying at the hotel or you're staying with friend and you're visiting, you know, you can just have the whole day planned to just come downtown and do all these things.

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I think it was in the master plan of Mr. [Fred] Carl to have, you know, all this in walking distance: a bookstore, you know, a gift shop, a bakery, a Cooking School, the Delta Bistro around the corner for lunch. And just things to do like that I think is fun.

00:49:49

AES: What bread do you eat at home?

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DB: Right now I make this bread that my son really likes a lot and I—sometimes I sell it at the—at the retail counter. It's called my lunchbox loaf. And it does have—it's—it's like my slicing loaf which is made with a *poolish*, which is like a—a little fermentation that you put into the bread to make it a—taste better, taste crunchier. But my son, who is eight years old, loves soft bread, so I make this lunchbox loaf for him. And it's like a *brioche*. You know, it's an egg-dough loaf, and he loves that kind of bread. So usually I'm eating what my eight-year-old eats.

[Laughs]

00:50:34

AES: Nice. Well, Donald, is there anything that we didn't talk about that you want to end on or something I didn't ask you about that you want to make sure to mention?

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DB: Well, I'm just glad you're here, and I'm glad you're talking about the Farmers' Market. You know, it's fun to see different towns and different Farmers' Markets. It shows a lot of the town and the community of not just the vendors who are there selling it, but who are the people that are your regular customers who come out there. A lot of the people at the Farmers' Market, they're out there every Saturday, you know, just great supporters and this town want the Farmers' Market to stay. I think it's a—even though there's some slow days, I think it's really great just for us to be out there and just have that alternative, and it's getting busier and busier I think every year, so thanks for having me.

00:51:24

AES: Thank you, Donald, so much. It's been fun.

00:51:27

[End Donald Bender Interview]