

Eliza MacLean
Cane Creek Farm – Snow Camp, North Carolina

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Date: September 13, 2011

Location: MacLean home, Cane Creek Farm, Snow Camp, North Carolina

Interviewer: Sara Camp Arnold

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: One hour

Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

[CUT from beginning: chatting about interview structure before asking MacLean to introduce herself]

00:01:28

Sara Camp Arnold: So this is Sara Arnold for the Southern Foodways Alliance on September 13, 2011. And can you please tell me your name?

00:01:39

Eliza MacLean: I'm Eliza MacLean, and I own and operate—mostly alone—Cane Creek Farm in Snow Camp, North Carolina. I was born on November 22, 1965, in New York City, and didn't last long in the city, I guess. My parents moved us to the country soon after that. And I have been chasing farming ideals for a long time, but have only started doing it in the last ten years.

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SCA: Okay; well why don't you tell me when you moved to North Carolina?

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EM: I moved to North Carolina in 1994. I got accepted to Duke University for a master's program and I—mine was really environmental toxicology, but it's a master's in environmental management at the Nicholas School of the Environment. And I also got—I was interested in a program at Berkeley, and I was sort of thinking between the two of those. And we came for a visit in July, and as hot as it was, it still was a really wonderful experience. And I decided to come back to the East Coast. So I moved from San Francisco, having been East Coast born and bred, and moved to North Carolina in 1994, and I haven't left.

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SCA: Okay.

CUT [*MacLean's daughter comes out on the porch to ask a question about her homework*]

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SCA: Yeah; you can move this stuff if you need to. Okay; so you came here in 1994, and you did the grad program at the Nicholas School.

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EM: Uh-hm.

00:04:59

SCA: Can you tell me a little bit more about that—about what environmental toxicology is?

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EM: Yeah; well, what—they're very—there were actually, even in the '90s, very few programs that were really specializing in environmental effects of persistent compounds—all the way from the First and Second World War, and most especially, I realized, from agricultural practices since the Second World War.

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We—we spray things; we utilize things; we degrade things in terms of our soil, and—and change the water and the air quality around them to, you know, produce faster, harder, cheaper.

And you know, we're starting to really feel the effects of that, from global warming on down to all sorts of weird health issues that we're all suffering from—even the most organically minded, you know, vegetarian eaters and that sort of thing.

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So I was working with marine mammals, seals and sea lions predominantly, and always interested in farming, but always interested in water quality. Because I grew up in the summers on the St. Lawrence River, and still go there with my kids every single year—even as a farmer. And *[Laughs]*—and so I was doing a lot of necropsies, a lot of work with cancer in—in marine mammals, and really was very curious as to why we were seeing such huge incidents, and—and you know, elevated incidents, and—and young animals acquiring things like that.

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So anyway, I looked around for programs and there were very few: Yale, Duke. Most of the others were sort of human-oriented which was also interesting to me, but so—it's—it's the study of—of compounds that—chemicals that we use in the environment and how they and their metabolites, what they break down to, actually don't go anywhere. And they just literally sit in our soils and our sediments and our estuaries and all the very special places where kind of life begins, and it affects all the rest of us up the food chain.

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SCA: So you had been doing work on that—on the West Coast before you came here. And then while you were here, did you go back and do your research?

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EM: I thought I would be back in two years. I thought I'd be back there heading up the science staff at the Marine Mammal Center, and in fact my going-away party from the Marine Mammal Center, that's what we all said. And I've been here ever since, because I felt a calling to really look at this farming state and who was doing what and—and who the newcomers were, and—and what they were trying to change, and I got involved with lots of things all at once, including having two children in 2000.

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But I just—I felt like the need was here and the opportunity was here. And it's worked out actually pretty well. It's been a lot of—lot of work, but—.

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SCA: So you—had you started to transition to farming by the time you finished the graduate program?

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EM: Not at all. I was actually doing a lot of racing. I was a very strong ultra-runner and endurance athlete most of my young adult and adult life, and I was competing internationally. And I had a really nice opportunity at Duke to do research in cancer and fishes, and—and actually have time to, you know, take a two-hour run during the day, or leave early on a Friday to go do speed attempts on the Appalachian Trail with a bunch of other runners, and that sort of thing. And as it became more and more international, I was going to other countries, and a lot of the things that we did prior to the events were looking at land loss, deforestation, trying to help them build trails, trying to help them control erosion and things like that—that I actually had a

great desire to help with and—and understand and—and sort of bring back home, because we have all those same problems here. *[Laughs]*

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And one thing just led to another and I—I finally did get pregnant. And I was looking for a way to stay at home with my kids. And I got involved with a bunch of rare breeds, people in the—in the old sort of timey livestock arena, very small esoteric group of people trying to preserve genetics from—from breeds that were more resistant to disease, more resistant to parasites, things that people had bred into our food chain 100 years ago and then we had completely forgotten about with all the advent of everything else I had told you about, mostly large-scale commodity, government-subsidized stuff that we eat.

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And—and it just was one fascinating link after another. I've had experience with the Amish. I've grown up on the largest freshwater system in the entire world. I had been to California where, you know, Alice Waters and everybody was already doing organic stuff, and it just literally—my entire schizophrenic past came together with this idea that I could actually sort of show a better way to raise livestock in particular, rather than boycotting it—that the eating of meat—because as a human species we're never going to stop. We're—it's steeped in our history and our—our rituals and everything and—and frankly, it's good for us in small amounts, and in the right way. And from an animal welfare standpoint, which is something I'd always been interested in; I had been involved in vet medicine in one way or another since I was twelve years old, and then the environmental complexities of the situation and the fact that you could actually do it naturally, sustainably, safely for the animal, the consumer, and the environment all at once—I just was hooked. And it's been—it's been sort of a calling ever since.

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SCA: Wow; well that raised—that was a really good answer [*Laughs*] but it raises some questions, too. So if we can go back a little bit.

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EM: Sure.

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SCA: Tell me about when you were an ultra-runner. I'm sure that—that came with a specific diet—or I would imagine that it might.

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EM: [*Laughs*] No; actually for me it was really quite the opposite. I think people all thought that I ran so that I could eat and drink as much as I wanted. I was kind of a yahoo; I never cut down on the beer and wine. I—I ate a lot of calories. I ate a lot of butter and liverwurst on the trail, and everyone thought that was absolutely disgusting. When I ran marathons I switched to pickle juice, and lo and behold, fifteen years later that's pretty much the diet of all of those—. I mean, the ultra-runners are eating butter and liverwurst, and the marathoners have pickle juice in their little packs. [*Laughs*]

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SCA: Really?

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EM: Yeah.

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SCA: What does the pickle juice do?

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EM: It—acid really helps an upset stomach. For some reason, it's not—most people find this—it's a little counterintuitive, but when you really have like—I mean, our stomachs are one of the first places that loses blood flow. When we're pumping blood and oxygen to our muscles to keep going, our stomachs tend to bottom out. And it's very hard to keep things going in and—and you know, sustaining yourself.

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And a lot of ultra-runners bonk, like literally crash so hard they couldn't even tell you their name, and then figure out ways to recover and keep going. It's not a sustained effort like a marathon. The very elite can do it like a marathon, but most of us just, you know, wait for the various epiphanies to happen. The night finally falls, and you slow down and you change your shoes, and it's all mental and then, you know, you can only see so far ahead of you, so you're—you're thinking about different things rather than where the next you know competitor is. You—you encounter people that are in way worse shape than you, and you become compassionate and you try to help them and you forget your own problems. I mean it is the coolest mental thing ever. It—it is—I want to take it to my grave. It is the happiest part of my life.

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But it—it makes you learn a lot about what a monogastric really is; I mean, we are what we eat. So I didn't have a very strict diet of any sort. I could have—I could have been better

about it. I could have probably been a better competitor because of it, but I was good, and I was in the women's field, you know, up there, and I really—I was just pushing the envelope to see what I could do. And now, if I really get serious about it—and I'm, you know, going into my fifties in the next few years, I—I'll probably have to take it all a little slower and more carefully.

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But it makes you very aware of what things do and how you body metabolizes things.

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SCA: And then go back; you said you've been involved with animals for a lot of your life. Can you tell me a little more about that?

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EM: Yeah; I was one of those kids whose mother had to come home to some wretched noise up in the bathroom and she'd say, "What is that?" And I'd say, "That's Inky; he's a crow. And he's got a broken leg and I've splinted it." And you know I just—I was constantly finding things I was trying to fix, epoxying shells of turtles and things like that. And a lot of it works. And—

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SCA: This was in Upstate New York?

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EM: This was—yeah, in New Jersey. And I gradually moved down to Philadelphia. And I'm the oldest, so my siblings really grew up in Philadelphia, and a lot of them still find it home, and

my parents are still there, so that's where we sort of take the grandchildren now—there and the St. Lawrence River.

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And my kids are sixth generation, so up there it was a lot of wildlife, too—endangered fishes and endangered birds, the whole DDT thing happened when I was a child where the Great Blue Herons were going to absolutely become extinct if we didn't stop using that stuff, and—. So it started early on the—the love of animals, and especially wildlife. And in suburban Philadelphia, my choice was the zoo which actually my family is involved in; my parents are both on the board, and—but it's a small zoo. The North Carolina Zoo is incredible; it's the best zoo in the world that I've ever seen, especially compared to these city zoos.

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But I did ride horses and I also—we had animals at my house. And I worked at a vet clinic down the road from age twelve on, and it has always been that sort of go-to. You can go to any city in the world, and there is somebody that needs help with animals in some way. You might be vaccinating the wildlife in a different country, because they choose to vaccinate the wildlife instead of the domestic animals, but there—there is—we live together on this planet, so there's always a need. So I'm a technician. I never did go to vet school. But I actually was partnered with a veterinarian who bought an emergency clinic with me, and we started several emergency clinics in California, and we were an incredible surgical team together. And I—I just got lucky. I've been—a lot of funny times in my life—have been at the right place at the right time.

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I was the youngest person to run the Southern States 100 miler in 1992; I was the youngest person in the field, and I was twenty-six. And you know, ten years later there were

eighteen year olds running it, so it just was one of those—. I've just had an eye for, you know, the slightly extreme for a long time, *[Laughs]* and—and kind of went that way. And I got—I had a similar jump-off-at-the-deep-end experience here with Cane Creek Farm. Because there were, in the past, meat producers at Carrboro Farmers' Market, but when I applied I think there might have been one. And now there are probably twenty of us, so that happened rather rapidly, too.

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SCA: Okay; well let's talk about—was this the first land, out here in Snow Camp, that you farmed? Did you come straight out here?

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EM: Not at all; that—that's a little—

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SCA: Can you tell me about getting out here?

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EM: —bit of a joke. Yes; in—so '94, '95, '96 I got my degree at Duke. I did a fabulous, you know, graduate thesis in Florida at a captive breeding plantation for large mammal species and worked with the vet staff there. But my actual focus on my thesis was an ecological study of an abandoned rice paddy. And after 150 years, what succession was happening vegetatively, hydraulically—because it all used to be gated and—and water was channeling through the paddies. And all those wooden gates had, you know, changed and broken down. And then in the wildlife. And so of course I was sampling wildlife and—and doing all that stuff down there.

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And I stayed at Duke because of the flexibility of the schedule. I was already working in the eco-toxicology lab, and I actually became manager of that lab. And then began to do more research myself, seed research to then get the PhD students in there. And during that time, I looked around for small farms, and my partner and I bought a ten-acre farm in Saxapahaw. And really again, nobody was in that little town, and now it's this unbelievable destination and hotspot. But we bought 10.2 acres surrounded by cornfields and on a dirt road. It was the most beautiful setting. It reminded me a lot of the St. Lawrence River and the—and the bigger islands that have roads and, you know, commerce on them.

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And—and that's where it all began. I—I started with goats and ducks and chickens, and we had lots of parties and friends coming out to play with all the silly animals, and eventually got into the pig thing. And the pigs caused me to have to expand down the road. They're a little more destructive. They need a little bit more space, so you can actually let things recover when you rotate them. And one thing led to another, and I bought that farm because it had a big old barn and it was pretty well suited with already established pens, fenced pastures, and that sort of thing. And while really creating a name for myself and getting into the Carrboro Farmers' Market and starting to be much more than just a—like a—a breeding stock producer, a livestock producer, I became sort of the—the meat person around here and started marketing to local restaurants and supplying some of—some of the—some of the agricultural meetings, the annual events, and that sort of thing. And I met Dr. Charles Sydnor, who had 100-plus acres from the '70s, and he was massively acquiring land out here in Snow Camp, and had amassed over 500 acres. And he said, "You need land, and I need a marketer."

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And we worked together for six months and basically hatched a plan and lo and behold this house that we're sitting at—which is encompassed by his farm—became available. And so and it was right before the economy crapped out, so it was actually sort of affordable, and we moved out here.

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SCA: We can take a break for a second. What do you need?

CUT: [*MacLean's daughter comes out to the porch again*]

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EM: So we ended up doing this thing, and it has not been easy. We all like to joke that I keep upgrading, and I've moved my farm three times, which—most farmers don't do but once, if ever. It is the hardest thing in the whole world to try to figure out how to move all the animals and all the infrastructure. And this place had no infrastructure, but it had so much space. There wasn't a fence in existence. I mean, I had turkeys and goats just tapping at my bedroom window. It was absurd. But slowly we've parceled things. I mean we've—I've tried to mimic the beautiful place that I just left. But the problem with that place was I needed—I needed more support from people. I needed more of another family, not—not even because of an off-farm income, which most people do. Most people have an off-farm income and a farm income, just in case something goes wrong with the farm. I've been a little bit foolish in trying to make this work and be the sole means of, you know, [*Laughs*] revenue that comes to me—myself and my kids, but it has worked mostly because of that luck and timing that I said. I think I really—when you're—when you're one of the first, when you're the—when you're on the crest of the wave, [*Laughs*] a lot of times you reap the benefits of that more than a lot of the other people that jump on the wave with

you. You also take a lot of the risk, but I have a lot of support in very different ways all over the place, and so I was willing to do it. Plus I had mastered sleep deprivation and ridiculous, you know work ethic-effort long ago, so I just thought I could probably manage it. I'm still not sure if I'm even really doing it.

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But I grow some beautiful produce. I have incredibly friendly, amazing livestock that I do turn into very tasty, healthy, good for you—you know, protein products and that—that is a little hard. I said good-bye to a sow today that I've had since 2003. And I spent some time with her at the abattoir, and I was with her when she was euthanized, and I'm a little nutty like that. But I feel like you absolutely have the most authenticity that one could get in knowing what you are eating when you buy my products. And it isn't a money-maker. **[Laughs]** I break even. And if anything really bad happens, I generally have to call in the, you know, the support.

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“I've lost my oven; help!” **[Laughs]** “Let's do more of this so we can make money for a new oven.” It's like I have to have a bake sale just to replace an appliance. That's a little silly. But I always know where my food is. **[Laughs]**

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SCA: Well, let's go back and talk about when you got started at the Market. That was on your first farm?

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EM: Yes.

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SCA: And what was the—so what year was this that you were getting into the Market?

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EM: All right; I think I was accepted at Carrboro in 2003—no, 2004. I started going to Wednesday Markets in 2004.

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SCA: And at that time you were one of the only meat sellers?

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EM: Producers. I mean, there were a couple people that had lamb randomly, and I think one lamb producer had just recently left and retired or something. And then there were one or two beef people, and I don't think anyone had pork. Nobody had pigs. I was in Orange County at that time. I was just over the line, and I was the only pig producer in Orange County.

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SCA: Wow. So tell me that first season of Wednesday—

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EM: That did it pasture-raised. There was one that had a little barn, like a little confinement operation—small, that—.

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SCA: Okay; so tell me that first season that you went to the Wednesday Market, what would you bring?

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EM: Well, the first thing I—I had—

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SCA: Were you doing all the sausages at that time?

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EM: I had—no; I didn't have very many. The first thing I developed was the breakfast sausage with sage, just a bulk sausage that you could slice or craft into patties. When I first started it was in a square block, so it was not a pretty-looking patty, you know, like you kind of wanted to make one. And not everybody wants to touch that or do that, and so pretty quickly I got some clear plastic chubs so that you could—like Jimmy Dean's—and just slice right through it.

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The recipe I created with an old man that was making it himself kind of under the table, black-market style, buying a sow here and there from people and cutting and making the whole big old 500-pound girl into sausage. So I worked with him and I learned how to make sausage and I made some with him and I loved it. And we—and it was paper-wrapped at very first before I even started going to the abattoir. But they can't do that; they can't send their USDA stamp on—on paper. So they—you know, we quickly figured out some sort of plastic film. And we changed packaging and never changed the ingredients, never changed that recipe. But over the next several years we developed others. And we got mixes. We made sure we didn't have MSG

and stuff in them. I mean everything was to go back to the old ways. But some of the old ways were changed like in the '50s for good reason—like preservatives in spice mixes. And so it was a little difficult to get a meat handler's license, find good-quality ingredients, get them passed through USDA, and all that sort of stuff.

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So there definitely were some hurdles and there were some—some things that I think make you earn and deserve the—the good fortune of being kind of out there first. Because you have to work pretty hard to—to repave that old road or something. So anyway; yeah, now I only—I try to keep around twenty-five different products.

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SCA: And so if you—you first brought sausage, but you said you had ducks and chickens at that time, too. Were you doing eggs?

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EM: Yes; I started with eggs pretty quickly. I didn't have a lot of product. I didn't make that much money at a market, but it was a place to sell and become recognized. And I basically sold the bulk of a pig—like the ham, the shank, the shoulders, the belly—to restaurants. And then I used the rest of the trim and whatever piece, like maybe one of the hams would be—would go into the sausage. So I was figuring out very quickly how to utilize the whole animal and make value-added products and have a market for those value-added products.

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Maple View Ice Cream, right when they opened their store, started buying my sausage. So I had a couple great little coups like that where people saw it out in my neighborhood and

started to learn who I was and began coming to the farm. And the—the thing that’s really sort of noted by people these days that are getting into this is that there are two jobs: one is actually creating the products, raising the animals and then creating the product after, but the other is marketing it. And marketing takes every bit as long as the farming. And that’s where the sleep deprivation thing came in, because I just didn’t sleep. I just stayed up all night answering e-mails and trying to network and figure out my next move, who I could go get—stuff stuff in the car and go visit the next day.

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CUT: MacLean’s daughter comes outside again

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SCA: Thank you. So why don’t you tell me—I want to hear about finding your abattoir and how that works, but then also starting the restaurant relationships. So can you tell me first maybe—I mean, you’ve got to get your product from a pig to a sausage—and how you found the abattoir?

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EM: Okay; and we should also talk about the Ossabaw Island hog, because I think that actually has helped this farm a lot, but it is not for everybody. I’ve had to really—I probably have lost some ground trying to champion a really lardy charcuterie pig and make that part of my market, because it’s not for everybody. So that’s—that’s kind of an interesting story. But it’s—it’s a good case in point why bigger is not better.

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Anyway, so okay, the—how I got into pigs in the first place after being with every other animal under the sun was that I decided to take a part-time job, because all I could find were very

demanding full-time jobs once the kids were born. I—I was very interested in—in like the Environmental Defense Fund, which is now just Environmental Defense, and Sierra—

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SCA: Club?

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EM: —Club, thank you. And a couple other organizations that had really good offices and—and smart, you know, scientists working with them. EPA, I mean that’s basically what my training was at Duke. It was designed to sort of funnel me into a job like that. And then I had these two beautiful kids on the heels of, you know, all this cool racing; my very, very wonderful, flexible job at Duke; and I was home with twins, and unfortunately realizing that I was probably looking at being a single parent home with twins.

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So I—I started working with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, and that’s where all the rare-breeds people came in, and that’s where I started really understanding that genetic integrity was probably a big factor that we were omitting in all of this. All the antibiotic-resistant stuff was because, you know, so many mutts are just mass-produced like car batteries in these CAFOs and that sort of thing.

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So I went and sort of followed this guy, Chuck Talbot, who was just appealing to me. He was raising Tamworth hogs—like Charles Durham in Chatham County—but out at A&T State University. And I—I did not realize that it was a historically black university; I didn't realize the affiliations with N.C. State and their agriculture, and the butting of heads, and all the insane

politics that go on there. I just knew this guy was there, and he told me to come out. And I literally got the job the day I showed up, as the only woman and the only white person in the entire, like, farm proper—which was probably 100 employees strong—managing the swine herd the day after I saw my first pig. I mean, I’ve had so much cool experience with so many amazing animals but I had never been around big breeding sows and boars. And I was amazed. They were smart, dignified, looked me right in the eye, like I just—I—I fell in love. And they were—and they were scary too. These were not well-treated animals, this particular group.

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So anyway—

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SCA: Were these all Tamworths?

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EM: Most of them, and they get kind of big and aggressive as they get older. But anyway, very quickly I got involved with this whole tobacco resettlement monies thing with Golden LEAF Foundation about—and this was Chuck Talbott’s brainchild, and the guy is amazing—about getting farmers that had pig experience, and they were often resource-limited African-American farmers down East that had tobacco allotments, back into raising pigs. Back into something that we would provide them a market, and they could literally bring their kids back from Jacksonville or wherever, back to their farms in—in these, you know, Eastern counties, and raise these high-quality, fatter, marbled, flavorful hogs for Niman Ranch. And Niman Ranch got involved, and American—Animal Welfare Institute; Heifer International put the money up to actually buy the first breeding stock and then do the pass-on program. It was the coolest group of five different

very bright entities, and I just landed right in the middle of it as the person receiving and breeding and then doling out these animals.

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So I learned a lot very quickly. I learned a lot about setting up a farm. I learned a lot about, you know, managing these herds and understanding these animals. I had already done some herd management of other species. So one thing led to another, and I looked around me and I saw nobody was doing it in Chapel Hill/Durham area, and so I decided to bring some home myself and—and I could have that income and the off-farm job.

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And that was a wild three years, but it was really one of the best times ever. I was in the middle of a yucky divorce, and I had something to absolutely sink my teeth into, and I—I did it, and I went for it, and I think it pretty well worked, because we helped start seventy farms in three years. And most of them are still in existence.

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So of course, having my own pigs, I needed my own abattoir, and I went to this old man that would buy the occasional sow from the University. [*Sound of cats fighting*] And now we have to have a cat fight. And—and so I asked him; I went and I learned from him, and then I asked him if he would take me and introduce me to the abattoir. And I'm so glad that I did, because I went to Jerry Matkins, who is a middle-aged white man that had a family business that had changed drastically over the several generations. I mean, he had been there since he was fourteen, and he was in his fifties when I met him, and, you know, nobody had pigs. He was cutting up hamburger cows. And he used to do a million pigs. And they had a scalding, and they were very, very knowledgeable but they just didn't have those clientele anymore.

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And I got in there and I said, “What do I need to do this, and will you, you know, help me a little? But I’m not dumb and I won’t, you know, I won’t waste your time? I’ll be a good customer.” And he kind of—didn’t really give me the brush-off, but he’s not the friendliest man in the world, and I had heard that from a lot of people.

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Anyway, we are extremely close friends now. I went to his wedding in May. He got remarried. And I have, I think, really helped him and a lot of other people. Because now I bring people and introduce them to him all the time, which I think is a very good way to start anything like that, because we are absolutely reliant on this person. He is the key to my business. Without him, I cannot sell my product. And you know I joked immediately with him and told him he wasn’t allowed to die on me any time in the next ten years, and you know, just silly things like that, and he loved it. And it—it’s worked out really well for me. He is not for everybody, and thankfully in the last five years, we’ve had to really grow that aspect of this industry, and not only have like twenty farmers’ markets started up in the time that I’ve been at Carrboro—and I’m not exaggerating—but probably ten processing plants in this state, which is incredible. We are so far ahead of states like New York. There are states like Wyoming that have *one* for the whole state and—and everybody—otherwise it’s a business that owns their own plant. But an independent entity that can process a small farmer’s red meat is actually, you know, a viable business in this state right now, when it really almost wasn’t.

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SA: And what town is he in?

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EM: He's in—it's in Gibsonville, but he's actually just north of Burlington on Route 87.

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SCA: Oh okay.

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EM: So he's not that far, and—

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SCA: So how far is it for you to take pigs up there?

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EM: Like forty minutes. And we have a chicken plant, and I raise chickens, turkeys, duck, and geese as well, and they are—

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SCA: And they go to a different—?

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EM: They go to a different one, but that's twenty minutes from me. So not only did I hit it at the right time, I'm in the best location of anybody I know for these services. And so I just—I got so lucky. I'm afraid to ever move my farm again, and I really want to take the whole thing to Upstate New York and go back home sometime. **[Laughs]** But anyway—

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SCA: Now tell me how you started getting involved with restaurants. Were you going door-to-door?

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EM: I really was at first. One of the first things that I discovered with a dear friend of mine who has helped me run this farm really from the get-go—Grace Summers, and I met her at A&T University as well—just wanted to see with all of—the—the way that a pig works is that it likes a clean place to sleep, it likes a clean place to eat and drink; it will never urinate and defecate in those places—almost never, once in a while. They go outside of their huts to relieve themselves, or outside of their barn or whatever. So you can keep a deeply bedded straw cozy place for a pig all winter, and they won't mess it up. Whereas goats, I mean almost every other livestock animal just does that wherever they are, and when they're eating and everything.

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So, I—restaurants—where the hell was I going with that? [*Laughs*]

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SCA: It's okay.

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EM: I brought people out to see them, but that's not what I was going to tell you. That was kind of—you asked me if I went door-to-door, and somehow I jumped on that whole thing. Anyway, I—I really knew that I had a great product. I was interested to see if people would want it locally. I knew which restaurants—if you asked somebody at that time, you know, who was doing what and when, you know I—I picked literally three great people to start with. And I went to them and

they were ready for it. They were already buying Niman Ranch products, and so they were so excited to just keep the money right here and not have to pay the shipping.

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Oh, the gardens, that's where I was going. Okay, so what I really—what I—what I was going to say that really happened was I had all these extra nutrients also, right—. Somebody gave me some very good advice right at the get-go, which was, “Get good at what you do. Don't spread out too quickly. You're good at raising these animals. You're a pig whisperer. Raise pigs. Get other people buying your pigs.”

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Well, I did that, and then I kind of realized that I was going to feed my competition if they chose to do what I was doing, but at least I was getting more of a volume around. So, I did—I did sell pigs locally and then I sold some farther away, and I got people in the Niman Ranch Program with the Golden LEAF Foundation by selling my own pigs as well. So all of that worked out pretty well. But very quickly I had quite a few pigs, and they were eating a lot of feed, and, you know, defecating quite a good volume of manure on my pastures.

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So my friend Grace encouraged me to till up one of these little pastures and just grow tomatoes. And I didn't really know—I've had gardens my whole life, so—but I've never done anything in any volume. So one year we put in 200 eggplant and about 700 tomato plants, all German Johnsons and a couple other heirloom varieties, but simple. And it wasn't a big deal to grow the seedlings. You know, they're in seventy-seed flats and one seed in each. Anyway, every single solitary plant came up and yielded about fifty pounds of tomatoes that year.

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SCA: And you think it's because it was on such great, fertile—?

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EM: Uh-hm; because their—their poop is so perfectly bio-available. It's as good as rabbit poop, and it just went crazy. And the—the hort agents and the livestock agents and everybody from different counties started coming over and looking at my farm and not believing that I didn't put anything synthetic out there. So it just exploded in the first year.

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But the problem was I had thousands of pounds of tomatoes. I was throwing them back to the pigs. So I started just loading up my Suburban out there—that same car—and just driving it around. And it—it was very weird, because I was intending to sell the pork but I was like, “Aaahh, tomatoes!” So I'd bring like a cooler of pork and eight million pounds of tomatoes, and I ended up selling both. And the next thing I knew, I had almost standing orders. I never did go that route. I did it always first-come, first-served; I still do, but I have some very loyal customers and they know I'm going to get them what they need. So it works out. And I've just catered my breeding to my demand and I've been pretty—pretty good about it.

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I'm—I'm a—I'm a decent planner. I—I look at everything about a year in advance and think about where I want to be next year, and with what, and that's about how long it takes to really know that I'm going to be able to provide so-and-so eighty pounds of shoulder a week by next May or something like that, and what I have to do to get there.

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SCA: Well, can you tell me; earlier you mentioned the Ossabaw Island variety of pigs. Do you want to talk a little more about those?

00:45:58

EM: Yeah; and I'll try to be brief. But it's basically a long-haired, long-legged, prick-eared little pig that 500 years ago was a lot like what they are in Spain now, the sort of black Spanish hog. It's kind of Berkshire coloring, generally white blazes on the face and four white feet, but they can come in any color of the rainbow now. And they were deposited on the barrier islands of the states way back when the Spanish were coming to investigate and check us all out. And they were left there for sort of a—a meat colony for the return trips. And they are still—this particular breed is still on Ossabaw Island, Georgia, which is off Savannah, and genetically intact. Because pigs are not good swimmers, and there have only been two known infiltrations of other breeds of boars in the entire time the animals have been on the island. And they're still there, and you can still go out and see them. You have to charter a boat, and they try to do controlled hunts and everything now, because they've got like 20,000 pigs running around this island just destroying the place. And they try to keep it at about 3,000 now. And it's monitored by Georgia Wildlife Commission.

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And anyway, along the way of trying to really manage this amazing animal, it was discovered that they contract type 2 diabetes—or obesity-induced diabetes. So they were quarantined by Missouri and Purdue and a couple other universities, I think, about fifteen years ago, and made sure that they weren't going to be bringing any diseases onto the mainland that had been eradicated in pigs. And pigs do get some diseases that humans can contract, so there's lots of weird stigma stuff about pigs. But when they're allowed to just be pigs, they're pretty

darn safe and amazing and clean, and—. You know, you don't need to cook them until they're leather and all that sort of thing.

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So somehow, through my whole wonderful alliance with all these people at N.C. A&T, a *New York Times* food writer, Peter Kaminsky, found me and Chuck Talbott and asked if we would be interested in sort of hosting a herd and seeing if we could finally create the prosciutto that they—that they make in Spain, which is called *jamón ibérico*, which is a lot like Parma prosciutto but a stronger oakier—. It's like a more robust wine compared to a really lovely Chianti, or something like that.

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So anyway, and he wrote a book about it that we were featured in, and I—one thing led to another, and I have had a herd for almost eight years now. [*Editor's note: the book is called Pig Perfect.*] I even have a couple of the original sows, still. I have gotten boars from different places. I have helped try to create some breed standards, because there aren't any. I've tried to grow the carcass a little bit just by the sheer fact that they're domesticated sort of in my context now. And finally I'm producing year-and-a-half aged prosciutto that is to die for, so all these years later it's finally come to fruition.

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But they're a fascinating little fatty breed. And to keep good, clean, non-inbred genetics, I've crossed them with all different breeds, just to see what I could get. And I have produced some incredible pork that has made me, you know, popular with certain chefs that want that style. It is not for the faint of heart. You have to be very fat-loving to love this pork. But people ask for it by name. They beg me to ship it to them. They send their loved ones to Carrboro

Farmers' Market when they're living in Missouri. I mean, it just—it's been a really fun tale. So that's why I wanted to tell it.

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SCA: So besides Ossabaw Island, you have—you still have some Tamworths?

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EM: Uh-hm. I still have some Berkshire Crosses. And then I have a whole line—not that many right now—of what I call an “Ossabaw Cross,” which is a Farmer's Hybrid, which is the kind of typical Niman Ranch, five-way, old-timey breed that was popular from the '50s to the '70s in the Midwest. And that's who—what we got for that whole grant that we were doing from '03 to '07. And—and then I—so I have Farmer's Hybrid, Ossabaw Cross, I have the Gloucestershire Old Spot, and then I have a random Tamworth or Berkshire. So, mostly focusing on the pure Ossabaw, the Ossabaw Cross, the Farmer's Hybrid, and the Gloucestershire Old Spot, so four breeds. I have boars and separate them in different pens and keep them—keep good records on them and that sort of thing. Some of them are registered; some of them are not.

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SCA: Well, can we talk just a little bit before we stop about the Market and about, you know, how things have evolved there? And you're on Saturday now, and maybe some of your regular customers, or what your Saturday routine is—things like that?

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EM: Sure; well, Wednesday is—is my sort of darling Market. That’s where I started. I made some really good friends, one of whom has sadly passed away: Ristin Cooks of Castle Rock Gardens. We unfortunately lost her to cancer in ’09. And she and I—she’s one of the best friends I’ve ever had, and that was a really special meeting. I never had that person that I said, “Will you save me the seat next to—you know, can I sit with you on the bus?” or whatever, and that was Ristin. Like, every meeting we went to, we’d save each other seats. We always advocated for each other. We sat—we always got our stalls next to each other at the Market, and—.

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So it quickly became a family, but we were all by ourselves in the shelter by the car wash. The Wednesday Market was only one shelter when I started, and now it’s a full two shelters, so that’s been lovely to sort of, you know, stake our turf and stick with it and then—and then welcome all these amazing new people. And we’ve got all these incredible bakers, and the pizza dough, and—and all that stuff now. And I do think that makes a strong Market. I mean, you can go and buy your entire week’s groceries there. And I don’t think even when I began you could.

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And Saturday, I—I—you know, I needed the money, and I went to enough Markets that first year on Wednesday to gather enough seniority to be invited on Saturday the next year—which I quickly did. And—and then you get to go through another year of kind of floating, but the customers are so wonderful at this Market. They really look for you. And they’ll ask if they can’t find you. And I’ve—I’ve been to so many other markets where—where vendors are literally accused if they miss a market. Or if they moved a spot because they were late or something, their customers lecture them, like, “I can’t believe you weren’t there last week,” you know, and all this. And—and Carrboro promotes this much more relaxed atmosphere. The

vendors are really kind to each other. There's not vendor fighting. The customers know the—the methods that we have to find out what's available, when we're going to be there, when we're not going to be there. They get on the lists, on the newsletters, they get on Sarah's vendor news mail; I—I just—it is paradise. I mean it—I'll go there, and I'll be in the grumpiest mood because I'm so tired from the week, and immediately the very first person that speaks to me, vendor or customer, makes me glad that I came.

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And I go fifty-one weeks of the year. I go probably more than anybody. *[Laughs]* I haven't figured out how to take the breaks in terms of the marketing. I'd like to do a lot more bulk buying and—and take longer trips away, camping with the kids and stuff like that, and I think we're getting close. And they're old enough finally to leave home alone a little bit, which is also helping, because I can concentrate my work.

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But anyway, they love the Market. They were kind of the only kids there for a while, and they've got some peers now that they've grown up with. And all the customers know them and everybody comments on, you know, their size, and—and their brightness, and—and how they're doing in their new school, and all that lovely stuff. And I—we went out in a snowstorm last year, and there were only three vendors. Of course I showed up, because I love the snow. And I had people show up on skis, with wagons, with studded snow tires, pulling their kids in snowsuits, and everyone was thanking me for being there, and I was thanking them for being there. It was ridiculous. I even got a shout-out at the annual meeting for being there.

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And I support this family—not entirely, because the restaurants are just as important—but at least fifty percent of my revenue annually comes from Carrboro Farmers' Market, which is

incredible. And Alex and Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farm told me that I could do that the very first day I came, and I didn't believe them. But I see a lot of people really dilute themselves, and not try to adopt that ideal or model or whatever. So I have actually gotten big in the years between '06 and 2010. And in 2011 I've been shrinking, to sort of go back to being able to support myself largely through this Market, and maybe take some weeks off in the winter, and—and cut down on my expenses. It's very expensive to get myself to Market, but you get in this kind of tumbled frenzy of, "I can't not bring in the revenue because I've got to pay the bills." And then, you know, it—once you finally get the balance really clear in your mind, you can actually reduce the bills and then reduce the frantic, so—. *[Laughs]*

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And again, Alex and Betsy told me that I'd be able to do that, and they were absolutely right. I keep better records now. I feel much smarter about the products that I produce. I feel less intimidated by people that either stop buying from me and don't tell me why, or, you know, just have a—a complaint that I feel helpless to address. I—I feel fully empowered these days, like I know what I'm doing. I am definitely my own boss, but I have answers; I have—I have ways of doing things. I mean I—I always joke about it—I've had this "melon-back guarantee" for years, because you can't really tell what a melon is. And once in a while you might get one that's just kind of insipid, and you paid a Carrboro Farmers' Market price for that melon, because it took me that much money to produce it. And I want those people to come back and tell me, "That was a yucky melon," because I'm going to hand them another one. And that one is going to be good, or we're going to figure it out together.

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And I finally started doing that with all my products. It was scary to just give people another pack of pork chops because it sounded like they let the pork chops spoil. But it doesn't

matter the reason anymore. You—you—I have really figured out the customer service end of things, and that’s really fun.

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SCA: Well, was there anything about the farm that maybe I didn’t—I know it’s almost dinnertime, so I’m going to let you go—but anything that I didn’t ask that you wanted to tell me about?

00:58:08

EM: Hmm; um, I—I’m looking forward to more years under my belt to do a similar interview to this, because every year that I look back on this experience I—I think about what is old and what is new and—. And it—and it never ceases to amaze me that every birth of every animal is still the most delightful thing I’ve ever witnessed, and I love seeing it through new eyes. I love when people—like our new intern saw her first calf be born today, and it just brought her to tears, you know, and that’s—that’s the beauty of it. And we see a lot of death; we act—we—we play God. I mean, we put these animals on the ground to send them to—to a certain death, but they have a life like very few could ever experience, and they teach it to each of their young.

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I don’t know; the—the hard work pays off in other ways. I’ve—I’ve focused a little bit on the financials, and they’re very frustrating, because it feels like you ought to be able to make a better living doing something so worthy. But the worth comes in other forms, and I guess that’s my parting thought: that it’s a beautiful teaching arena, and I constantly learn every day, too, so—.

00:59:45

SCA: Well, thank you.

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EM: Any thoughts?

00:59:50

SCA: No; thank you.

00:59:51

EM: You're welcome.

00:59:51

[End Eliza MacLean Interview]