

**FRANK & PARDIS STITT**  
**Highlands Bar & Grill – Birmingham, AL**

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**Date: December 30, 2004**  
**Location: Highlands Bar & Grill – Birmingham, AL**  
**Interviewer: Jake York, SFA Member**  
**Length: 1 hour**  
**Project: SFA Founders**

**[Begin Frank & Pardis Stitt Interview]**

00:00:00

**Jake York:** This is Jake York on December 30, 2004, with Frank and Pardis Stitt at the Highland Grill in Birmingham, Alabama. First, I wondered if you could tell me—each of you how you became involved in Southern Foodways Alliance; what was your sort of first—first point of involvement?

00:00:29

**Frank Stitt:** I think it was via John T. Edge. John T, I guess it was kind of—told us about what he was planning. I think that Martha Johnston at *Southern Living* also was encouraging us to—to be involved and it just was something that was—was if there's anything that's right up our alley it's being involved with Southern Foodways and the Southern traditions of—of food and how that affects us personally and as well as culturally.

00:01:01

**JY:** What—what was the invitation like? I mean did one of—John T or Martha call you up and—?

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**Pardis Stitt:** They had just called us up; I think Martha had been in the restaurant and had been talking to us about it, and then I think John T had just called you and had a couple of conversations with you.

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**FS:** Right.

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**PS:** And then my—in my mind, my sense of time is really bad—

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**FS:** I think it was [nineteen] '99.

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**PS:** Was it—well this was '99; I think it was in '98 that we did that event at—on the campus [of the University of Mississippi] and—was it? Okay?

00:01:29

**JY:** That first symposium was in '98.

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**PS:** Was it '98, okay—okay; yes, we were there. Frank did the lunch out on the—on the quad or—with the pig ear sandwiches and—which I think it was actually a big hit. It was a lot of fun being out there and my first introduction to—

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**FS:** The asparagus with—

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**PS:** —to Oxford.

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**FS:** To the Southern—and to Oxford, right.

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**PS:** And to Oxford, so it was fun hanging out with—with that group. There was a—it was a weekend event in October maybe—?

00:02:00

**JY:** Yeah.

00:02:01

**PS:** You know more than—

00:02:01

**JY:** Well that's the chronology; I remember the chronology so, yeah.

00:02:04

**PS:** Okay, well good; you can help us with that.

00:02:06

**FS:** Okay.

00:02:07

**JY:** And so you—you cooked the lunch there and then you—you were also at the fifty founders' meeting [in Birmingham]—both of you, the next summer?

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**FS:** Right; that's right—that's right.

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**PS:** Uh-hmm.

00:02:16

**JY:** How were you invited back to that or had you—you know, had you stayed in contact with everyone?

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**PS:** Well we stayed in contact. I mean we pretty much stay in contact with John T via email or phone anyway and—but that—

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**FS:** And I think that through subsequent trips of John T and John Edgerton to visit *Southern Living* that they would have dinner here and that we would continue conversations about that.

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**JY:** Okay, great. And what was—what was your thought—can you describe your participation in that founders' meeting in the summer of '99?

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**FS:** I just remember being there at *Southern Living* and there were of course lots of personalities involved, from Natalie Dupree and others, who I think had certain ideas. And then I was

certainly, I think, able to express my ideas of—of how it's a lot ingredient driven and how interested I am in working with local farmers in producing Southern ingredients so that we can have wonderful ingredients to cook with for me as a chef—as a restaurateur and for us just as a culture so that we don't lose out on the lady peas and the butter peas and the—the Georgia Bell Peaches that we need to preserve.

00:03:43

**JY:** And what—

00:03:46

**PS:** I had to work that day so I didn't get to go. [*Laughs*]

00:03:49

**JY:** What did you hope that Foodways Alliance would—would do and did you see it being a part of that sort of preservation process? How exactly did you envision the Alliance?

00:03:59

**FS:** Well I—as a preservation and also as a gathering of ideas to reminisce, share stories about food memories of food histories that were—I'm from, from northern Alabama. Well in many ways were similar but different from people throughout the South, and from an intellectual level I think it's just great for educated and—and other people to come together and talk about some of their great and not so great times of cooking and of those traditions that I learned about through my grandmother's farm and being at my grandparents' farm table. And I think that those are the things that I feel as a chef and a Southern chef somewhat obligated to preserve, to talk about, and find out the best most wonderful salient things and to pass those on.

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**JY:** And Pardis—?

00:05:01

**PS:** I don't know if I ever thought of that—my goodness; that was very good. **[Laughs]** You know something, fast-forwarding the events of past summer and—I don't know if you're interested in talking about that so much—but that was a fascinating weekend, I guess, of having just all these very, very interesting people come to Birmingham and to—I mean just the dialogue, you know. And I think that's what—that's sort of based on what you just said, to have people come together and to discuss these ideas. And there's so many things that we just know but we don't—you know, you hold onto them and then there were people from Ohio; they were from all over the country—Colorado—discussing how Southern Foodways and, you know, they were just fascinating.

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**FS:** But I think something else that struck a cord of familiarity and with John T and Pardis and myself here at Highland and our restaurant has always been a collaboration between the African American—the black Southerners and the white Southerners, and I think that John T saw in our community there was a restaurant as well as in a larger community—Birmingham—of how that's come together to—for us to be at the table together, for us to be in the kitchen together, and to kind of have a good way of relating with blacks and whites. And so I think that's something that's a little bit special about our history here in our restaurants.

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**JY:** Say a little bit more about that. I mean what is the—what is the background of Highlands Grill that makes that particular—?

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**FS:** Well when I started Highlands in [nineteen]'82. I basically brought with me a half dozen folks that we all worked together at the Hyatt—the Regent—the Hyatt downtown in Birmingham and this was—we had done that in '79 and '80 and '81 and there was Gordon Avery, there was Wayne Russell, and there was Clarence Young—

00:07:11

**PS:** Dawn Lester Miles—?

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**FS:** Well Dawn wasn't at the Hyatt, but she came as well and—and Verba [?] Ford as well—

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**PS:** Was Diana part of it, Dawn's sister, in the very beginning?

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**FS:** Dawn's sister was a part of it, but there was a core group of people that happened to be predominantly black who are folks that 20-something years later are still a part of our—our restaurant and so I think that—that kind of mutual respect for the individual qualities among one another has been an example for other workers, for other employees, and for the community to see that, whether subconsciously or not, that here was a restaurant that was trying to be the greatest restaurant in the South, and it was not your old country club set of you had the white



managers and you had the black workers. There was very much the—the people that have managed to have taken care of important decisions and have influenced our path—have been black people from Alabama, and these are the people that are our friends as well as our co-workers.

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**JY:** And is this relationship something that you had in mind as part of Southern Foodways when you went to those first Alliance meetings, the symposium, and the meeting? I mean are these—

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**FS:** I think that that's more something that John T has pulled out of—

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**PS:** This was a natural relationship for us; I mean this is not something—it's not a contrived situation. It's just this is our life; this is the way it is and we consider ourselves just—

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**FS:** Right; that was not so much an agenda; the—the agenda was just to have integrity as a businessman and as a chef and as a restaurateur and to fight any attempts at racism whenever I spotted it among purveyors or among other employees. And so I think that—that's—I'm not a hero. I wasn't on the lines fighting for civil rights in the early '60s but—I was about eight years old—but anyway this is—in a small way this is a way for us to bring two communities together.

00:09:40

**JY:** Excellent. Now have you been involved in any other societies that saw to preserve Southern foodways before you became part of the Southern Foodways Alliance? There was Society for Preservation and Vitalization of Southern Food and there was American Southern Food Institute; there was at least one more.

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**FS:** There was—

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**PS:** You did something with the—

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**FS:** I did something with—

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**PS:** With the Preservation of—?

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**JY:** The Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food?

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**FS:** No, I—I was not a significant member of those. I perhaps was talked to or consulted. I was involved with the American Institute of Food and I've been—

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**PS:** But nothing specific to southern foodways.

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**FS:** Been involved with Board National—Board Member of the Chef’s Collaborative for promoting sustainable agricultural and humane animal husbandry, but—but nothing else.

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**JY:** Was there a key moment in either the symposium in ’98 or in the Founders Meeting in ’99 that you remember that sort of crystallizes your thoughts about what the Alliance was going to be?

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**FS:** Well I think that to see the University of Mississippi and Oxford and to have the support of that University and to have a dynamic individual like John T heading that up that here was finally a—a group that could corral all of these disparate ideas and the themes and traditions and have the—the funds and the wherewithal to put—put it together. I mean no one else could do this as an individual. I mean so it was just—I think a wonderful thing that the University of Mississippi and John T did and for me that just is like, “Wow, this is good.” I mean there’s a secretary that can answer the phone and there is somebody that can respond and there’s—there’s some people that can put some work into the administrative side that all of us that are—I mean as—as a chef and restaurateur, we don’t have time to—to do something like that.

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**JY:** Well now that you brought that up—the fact that—I mean this work that you do that’s very time-consuming, what’s been your role in programming either the symposium or the field trips since that time?

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**FS:** Well actually we had—

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**PS:** I have to—.

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**FS:** Okay—a—a conflict in that every year for the fall symposium conference we have our biggest benefit fundraiser for Magic Moments—for basically terminally ill children—that falls on the very same weekend, and so I have not been able to be as part of this. And I think it was in the end of October for most years and—. But anyway, so that prevented me from being more involved. Obviously, this last year we were involved with the field trip to Birmingham, and that was wonderful. And doing a—a lunch here and conference here and then off—so the following across the street at the church were the panel discussions, but it's been a little bit more of just kind of talking and sharing philosophy and ideas with John T directly.

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**JY:** How far in advance of the Birmingham field trip did John T or someone else from the Alliance get you involved?

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**FS:** Well this would just be a guess but my—my recollection would probably be about six to nine months out, and so we could pin that down and that's—that's about—

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**JY:** At that point what—what were you being asked to contribute?

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**FS:** Well to do a lunch, to bring people together on that Friday and to then—to speak to the participants at that lunch, as well as to be on the follow-up panel about—actually, there were two other food professionals besides myself who were—who are black and we talked about our involvement in—as a food professional and also just how race has affected us and how food has brought us together.

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**JY:** And how did that influence your—your menu planning for that particular lunch or, you know, your comments?

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**FS:** Well the menu planning, I think, for that lunch was I wanted to do kind of this take-off on a meat-and-three and—but instead of a meat I did rainbow trout and a Smokey Mountain trout that—with—but with wilted greens and with cornbread. And with I'm not sure if we did creamed corn or what we did but basically, a slightly lighter healthier lunch. And my sensibilities of having a lunch that is light, so that people can be fresh and feel good to pursue their day in the symposium and the seminars.

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**JY:** By a meat-and-three—what—what does that mean; what does that signify to you? Why did you focus on that?

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**FS:** Well I—the old-time Southern restaurants that I think had prospered throughout the mid-part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were often places that did have Southern vegetables, and that was the three and then the meat was something—another component of it. And I think that—I mean from a Niki’s West to a Social Grill to all the other countless Southern restaurants, I think there’s something about those humble restaurant connections that, I think, for somebody like me to stay tuned into and not to get too fancy and be doing Maine lobster for, you know, an event like this.

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**JY:** Is that part of your childhood—eating, as well—a meat-and-three? I mean you—you described—those are Birmingham restaurants you’re referring to.

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**FS:** Right, right.

00:16:11

**JY:** Is this part of—is this part of your childhood eating experience?

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**FS:** A little bit. It was not—I was—had more of the farm experience with my grandparents’ farm of having the most incredible vegetable lunches throughout the summer that came directly from my grandmother’s garden and those—the quality of those ingredients and those Southern styled creamed-corn and fried okra and boiled okra and stewed—stewed okra and tomato salads

and cucumber salads and pole beans and green beans and cornbread and butter beans and pink-eyed peas and new potatoes cooked with onions, those were the things that are my food history and memories of the Southern table. It's only been in my adult life that I kind of would see a Niki's or other places that—where typically, you would be exposed to those kinds of foods.

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**JY:** And how did you choose the particular elements for that lunch? I mean your—your suppliers and so forth, did you seek out special farms or—?

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**FS:** Well I mean this was—actually, more of the Farmers Market of what's in season at that time. And also, there is one farmer that I deal with and—and—Danny Jones in Blount County—and he kind of keeps me tuned into what's coming in. Also Michael Dean, an organic farmer, who helped supply some of the other ingredients; he's here in Leeds and so those are the—and the farmers who keeps us grounded, as far as letting us know what's in season and what we should be cooking.

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**JY:** Where would you like to see the Foodways Alliance go—go from here now that you've come through the Birmingham filtrate?

00:18:01

**FS:** I have memories that are kind of shaky; some of the old elegant dining rooms of the South—there was the Lions Hotel in Decatur, Alabama, and there was another restaurant, I think, that did pig brains and eggs in Decatur. There were the early days of the all-steak. You know

there—from what I understand there's a restaurant in Talladega that had a great history of interesting food. There were some wonderful junior league cookbooks from Mobile back in the late part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and of—of Louisiana cooking in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I'm fascinated by recreating some of those menus and some of those foodways and some of those connections. We've lost a lot of our preserving of foods—curing hams, bacon, putting up vegetables; I'm absolutely fascinated with that part of the food cycle. And so what used to be done, whether on church get-togethers or at the grandma's farm, we're quickly losing sight of that. I'm—I think it's important that we have a better connection with the farmers so that we can encourage them that they can get a little bit more money for growing the varieties of vegetables that are growing—that used to be grown for flavor and even now the ones that do have flavor and integrity—have character instead of what's happened with agriculture in the last 50 years is just the—the factory mentality of farming. And I think that—that mentality of producing the cheapest possible food has really been a terrible disservice to our—our country. You know, we've got to really rethink that. We've got to encourage our governments to have slaughterhouses so that people can raise animals humanely and feed them good feed and then have them processed, instead of having them shipped out to, you know, a feed lot in the Midwest, where they stand elbow-deep in their own manure for a couple months; and so we've got some real problems in our—in our foodways right now.

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**JY:** Do you think the—do you think the symposium model is—is enough? Do you think that it offers enough opportunities to do that sort of thing, or are there other types of action you would like to see the Alliance participate in?



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**FS:** No, I think that the Alliance needs to get a little bit more political and have some of our politicians at these events, and I also would like to—to—for us in our recognition of the history of the Southern farm—the Southern foodways—is to think about the health and nutrition and how we've lost—are losing that to the factorization of—of farming. And I think that there is a possibility of Southern Foodways to help niche markets of farmers that are going to grow—raise free-range chickens and are going to raise heirloom varieties, but we've got to be a facilitator in getting that out and getting it out to our politicians so that basically, now, who runs things are the huge agri-business farmers and that is—it is absolutely cross-purpose to—to what I think is important.

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**JY:** Excellent. I just want to ask you a couple of—these are more sort of background questions about yourself. Can you tell me when and where you born?

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**FS:** I was born in Birmingham in 1954, August 4<sup>th</sup>.

00:22:06

**JY:** Okay, in Birmingham. And then where did you grow up—was it around Birmingham?

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**FS:** My father was in—finishing his surgery residency here and then he moved to Cullman; we moved to Cullman in about '58 and I grew up in Cullman, Alabama—50 miles north of here.

00:22:29

**JY:** Okay. And you—you described your—your grandparents' farm. Was that in Cullman or near Cullman?

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**FS:** Right outside Cullman was my grandparent—White's farm, that's right.

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**JY:** And you spent a great deal of time there as a boy?

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**FS:** Well we—yes—yeah.

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**JY:** Is that your primary engagement with Southern foodways, through—through your grandparents that way or also in your—in your parents' home?

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**FS:** Well through my—through my parents and my other grandparents we got to travel a lot to—whether it's New Orleans on a regular basis to eat and then great restaurants there or Atlanta or—or Highlands, North Carolina, or—but throughout the South. And so that was pretty good exposure to—to different things but it was—some of my great food memories are certainly from those small gardens of my grandparents.

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**JY:** Are we also cooking as—?

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**FS:** No, not at all.

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**JY:** When did you begin to prepare?

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**FS:** I started cooking when I was actually—living in the Bay Area and going to school at UC Berkeley in the mid-‘70s and at that time I was fascinated with the French food, the French culture, French language and not—had not made the connection of trying to celebrate Southern foods or Southern traditions.

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**JY:** What brought you back around to Southern foods?

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**FS:** I—after living in California for three years and—and having been in Boston for two years, then I moved to Europe. Basically, I was fascinated with the French foodways and—and so I was lucky to work with a great food writer Richard Olney, and through his mentoring I became all the more fascinated with food and as—actually, it was spending time in the markets in the south of France that I kind of had an epiphany of thinking, well in many ways, you know, these small towns and rural areas of the south of France have a certain connection or similarity to the ones in the South. And then I decided to come back here, even though I had a little—spent a year in the Caribbean and then decided to come back and to try to create a great restaurant here in Alabama.

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**JY:** Great. Now can you describe the—your greatest meal—single meal of your—of your youth, let's say before you graduated high school?

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**FS:** Uh-hmm. [*Sighs*] Well those, I mean—those summer meals at my grandparents where there was creamed corn made with filled corn and corn on the cob made with sweet corn and stewed okra with onions and tomatoes and—and fried okra and butter beans and potatoes cooked with onions—those meals were just astounding to me and they—partly because meat was not the—the main attraction but it was all of these incredible vegetables. I mean I didn't really realize how—how fortunate and how—I mean how much work went into—into that but there was just a savory-ness that was unique.

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**JY:** What's the culture of this type of meal that you would call—were there certain rituals? Is there a curriculum for the meal?

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**FS:** Well it's—it's really—it's being a gardener at—at heart and then my grandmother and mother were both gardeners, and they also loved flavors—just the pleasure of good food—and they would go to such incredible links to make the preserves and the jams and the marmalades; they loved being in the kitchen, and they loved sharing their food. And sharing their food, I think, was their biggest connection with kind of just the love of being alive.

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**JY:** And your—your parents and grandparents, have they eaten in your restaurant?

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**FS:** Well my parents have and they're both deceased and my grandparents, Ulela [?]  
—my grandfather did not and Ulela did and my grandmother Stitt did but not my grandfather Stitt.

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**JY:** And did they—did they feel that you were honoring their way of life, their way of eating?

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**FS:** I don't really know if there was so much of that as I think they thought it was amusing that, you know, this kind of fancy restaurant was using these humble ingredients that you don't think of in a white-tablecloth restaurant.

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**JY:** Well I think that's pretty much it, unless you have other things you'd like to say about the Alliance or just, you know, Southern foodways in general—what you'd like to see happen—happen next.

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**FS:** Well I think that for us to try to make a commitment to sustainable agriculture for the sake of our environment and for the sake of our regional well-being I—I—that's very important. Sustainable fishing needs to be addressed; there needs to be very serious limits imposed on fishing so that we will have wild fish for the future. I—I feel like sometimes we're—we're

watching a train wreck and not realizing that the train is wrecking when it comes to the factory farming mentality.

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**JY:** That's—

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**[End Frank & Pardis Stitt Interview]**