

ROGER & CHRISTOPHER DEAN
Dean's Barbecue – Jonesboro, GA

Dates: November 30, 2010
Interviewer: Ashley Hall, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Georgia

[Begin Roger & Christopher Dean Interview]

00:00:02

Ashley Hall: So this is Ashley Hall with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m in Jonesboro, Georgia. It’s November 30, 2010; I’m here with Mr. Dean. Mr. Dean can you tell me your full name and--?

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Roger Dean: Roger Dean.

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AH: I’m sorry; say it again.

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RD: Roger Dean.

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AH: And what is your profession?

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RD: Restaurant owner [*Laughs*].

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AH: What’s the name of your restaurant?

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RD: Dean’s Barbecue.

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AH: And if you wouldn’t mind, your date of birth for the record, please?

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RD: April 27, 1946.

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AH: How long has Deans Barbecue been opened?

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RD: Sixty-three years.

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AH: And were you the--the person who opened it?

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RD: No; my mom opened it. I was 18 months old when we opened but I was behind the counter the day we opened, you know. So, I’ve been here all my life.

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AH: And what inspired your mother to open this restaurant?

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RD: Oh she--this house next door is where we lived and she sat on the porch and my dad worked for the mill down in Griffin, Georgia. And he’d have to catch--he had to work the second shift, so he’d catch a bus every day. You know, we’d sit out on the porch waiting on the bus to come and--and my mama looked across here, and there was a bunch of wild plum trees out here. And she said, ”If you—Jesse, if you cut down them plum trees and build me a little restaurant, we can make some money.” And he said, “Lady—“ This is just right after the War—“How can--ain't no money to be had.”

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So you know, every day she’d just hound him and hound him and hound him. So, finally one day, he got tired of it, and he got almost--he was flagging the bus down--and he turned around and he said, “If you can find the money to build that restaurant, I’ll build it to shut you up.” So, he got on the bus and before it got around the curb about a half a mile down the road, she was on her way up to the barn, and she told my granddaddy; she said, “Get the old lead line on that milk--Jersey milk cow.” And so she walked it to Jonesboro, which is about two miles up--up the street and sold it to a--a city cop for \$80.

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So, when Daddy come in the next morning, she handed him--she met him in the hallway about 3 o'clock in the morning and said, “Here’s \$80. Get started on my restaurant.” So he got a little sleep, and the next day he went up to the Jonesboro Lumber Company and started buying studs and all--as far as his money would go. He come down and cut down the plum trees and started building it. And so he run out of money, so he had to go to a neighbor down the street,

Bob Hickman, and borrow \$100. And so he went as far as that \$100 would go, and then he went to his brother and Warner Robins and borrowed \$100 and he finished up the front room.

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He put a lock in the door, this back door, turned around and throwed her the key to the lock and said, “Well, there’s your restaurant. Now what you going to do with it?” She said, “How much money you got?” He said, “Well I’ve got two \$10 bills left.” She said, “I’m opening in the morning.” So, she--this was 1941 back then--this main road from Pennsylvania to Florida, so she stood outside the road and flagged down the Betsy Ross bread man and bought some bread; flagged down Tom’s Peanut man and bought some peanuts and potato chips and stuff like that. And then she called a taxi service in Jonesboro, and Mr. Miller come down and got her and took her to [Griffin] Grocery Store, and she bought this and that. And the next morning, she opened up.

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AH: And what’s your mom’s name?

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RD: Essie Dean.

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AH: And your father?

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RD: Jesse Dean [*Laughs*]--Essie and Jesse. But, that’s the way--that’s the way it started. And the first day she was out here she worked--she opened at 6 o'clock the next morning until 10 o'clock the next night, and she took in \$3 and something. And so she was so disgusted and so disappointed, but then, the next day, she took in \$12. And then the next day she took in \$60. So she was on her way and ever since then, knock on wood, except for snow or something like that, we’ve never opened and lost money.

00:03:49

AH: Great; so what--why did your mom want to open a restaurant? Was she--was that in her family? Was she a good cook?

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RD: No; Daddy actually started cooking--you know, cooking barbecue in Griffin, Georgia in 1925. And he was in it for about four years or so and then the Depression hit. So he had to take and move out into the country to feed the family and rent a house where he could have a garden and all, and then he could feed the family. So the barbecue place in Griffin closed, and he wasn’t the owner but he was--you know, worked there. And so that’s where he learnt to barbecue is at that place in Griffin, Georgia.

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And so then he--you know, he stayed out of it. He--my dad was very--you know, he had a very crazy career because he cooked barbecue and then he went to work as an airline pilot, you know, flying the mail service from Atlanta to all--you know, all corners of Northwest Florida, and he did that for about a year and a half--two years. And he--he crashed landed [*Laughs*] in a peanut patch in South Georgia, and it skinned him up pretty good, so he never went back to

flying. So Mama told him to get something less dangerous, so he went to work as a brakeman on the railroad, running across the top of the trains and hooking and unhooking the cars.

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And so then--and when the War started, he got a deferment because of the number of kids he had and all, and so he went to work for the mill. And he worked there from about '40--'41 through--he worked there until '49. And then--

00:05:26

AH: What kind of mill was it?

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RD: It was a cotton mill, a cotton mill, like they have all over the South. But anyway; mother opened in '47 and she wanted him to come in with her right away. But he said, "Somebody has got to feed the family, so I'm not going--I'm not going to quit the mill until you make \$100 in one week, you know, clear."

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So that was in '47; in '49, it was right after Thanksgiving, '49, she was excited. She went in the house and told him; she said, "I got \$105 left." And he said, "Well, I'll quit the mill." So he went in the next week and turned in a two-week notice, and then he left the mill and he stayed here until he died. So you know, that's how it--that's how it got started.

00:06:06

AH: Was your mom making barbecue from the beginning?

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RD: No; for the first six months it was breakfast. You know she was opened 24 hours a day. So you had breakfast, hotdogs, hamburgers, cheese sandwich--anything they wanted she’d make. As a matter of fact, my sister was--older sister was here, and she was cooking supper in the back room, you know, in the kitchen for her family. And so a truck driver come in, and he said, “Well today I want a cabbage--cabbage sandwich with mustard and a glass of buttermilk.” And she didn't say a word. She went back; she just boiled him some cabbage. She went back and put some cabbage [*Laughs*] on a loaf of bread with mustard and got him a glass of buttermilk, and took it around the counter, and put it on there and she said, “There it is.” He looked kind of surprised, and he said, “Doggone, I’ll never order that again.” [*Laughs*] You know? But that’s just you know stuff--the way it was.

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But we just, you know, we started barbecuing and I guess it was about the middle of ’48, she--she told Dad; she said, “You know. You know how to barbecue and I--I know a little bit about it.” She said, “Let’s go over in the woods over across the road and try to get some rock and make a little small pit we can cook three or four hams on.” So they went and got rock and built a little pit, and, you know, when Daddy was off of work he was out here cooking. And so, that’s how it started.

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And then in ’49, he built a bigger pit and so--. But you know, really, for the first--see, I guess six or seven years, we wasn’t Dean’s Barbecue. We were Dean’s Truck Stop because every truck, you know, coming up and down this road--this was the main road, and they would stop in, and you know, get a sandwich and a cup of coffee. And people thought we were burning the world up because this yard was just full of trucks all the time. But they’d come in here and sit

an hour and a half taking a break. And you know, there’s no money there. They’d get 50-cents worth and sit for an hour and a half, so you know.

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But then in--when they built the new--new four-lane over there a block over, then all the trucks was over there. So we--excuse me; we moved to--to the--to Tara Boulevard for about a year and a half. Daddy built a place over there where the Courthouse is now; it’s across the street. It was Buddy’s Mobile Homes; well, we were there first. And so he built the place, and we stayed there about a year and a half or two years, but Daddy couldn’t take the Yankees. I mean he--he was opened 24 hours a day seven days a week over there, and they’d come in and order breakfast. And he’d bring them out breakfast and, you know, ham and eggs and grits. And they’d say, “Grits? What--what is this?” And he said, “Grits.” They said, “We want hash browns.” He said, “What’s hash browns?” You know, he didn’t even know.

00:09:00

So he--you know, they aggravated him; so, he had a filling station on one end and the barbecue place on the other end. And so, you know, I was pumping gas there in ’55 at about--I think it was 13-cents a gallon for regular and 17-cents a gallon for ethyl. But then, he just didn’t like it over there, and he said, “I’m going to go back over to my old place. If I--if I survive, I will; if I don’t, I don’t.” So he come back over here in ’57, and I guess, then to now, we just keep going.

00:09:32

AH: So, was this location still open when y’all were opened down there?

00:09:36

RD: No, no; this--my sister and her husband lived here. They took the counter down and all and that--that front room was a--a living room and then the kitchen part, you know, they had, you know, the stove and refrigerator and all that. And then that back room over there, they made a bedroom out of. And so, they--they lived here for about the two years that we was over there.

00:09:56

AH: So there was two years when this wasn’t a restaurant?

00:09:59

RD: Yes; two years it wasn’t a restaurant here. We still was in business but we was over about a mile and a half away. But then we come back home in ’57, I think it was, and started this one and--you know, started it back up and been going ever since.

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AH: How did you talk to your--was it your aunt or your sister who was living here?

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RD: It was my sister.

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AH: What was her name?

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RD: Noma.

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AH: How did you convince Noma that--to give the place up to become a restaurant again?

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RD: Well, she--she was working with--over there. And so, when Daddy told her--him and Mama told her, “We got to go back to our old place; we just--we just can't stand it over here,” she went ahead and moved on down on Noah’s Ark Road, which is a block away, and got her a house. And so, we moved back in here and started the business up again, so--.

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AH: You said you had a lot of brothers and sisters, how many?

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RD: Eight. Well there’s eight including me. There’s--there’s five boys and three girls. And they all are alive except one, and Noma passed away. But they--they--you know, they’re scattered from Chickamauga to Jacksonville, you know, so some of them I haven't seen in years and years and years.

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AH: Where do you fall in the line of the eight?

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RD: Next to the youngest. [*Laughs*]

00:11:12

AH: So did all eight brothers and sisters work here at some point?

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RD: Well when--when they were young, like in high school and all the--the boys would curb. We had curb service back then. And they would curb and all, but it’s just two of us that was ever interested in the business, and that was me and Noma. We was the only ones ever interested in the business. The rest of them they couldn’t wait to get away. You know, they wanted something else, so--.

00:11:36

Terry moved to Jacksonville, and Steve moved to Chickamauga and you know, Jimmy moved to McDonough, and so forth and so on. And Patsy moved to Sweetwater, Tennessee, and so they’re just scattered around all over the area now. So but, you know, but that’s it, and--.

00:11:54

AH: Well when you reopened the restaurant in ’57, I think you said it was, did it start up as a barbecue place?

00:12:00

RD: Oh yeah; uh-huh. It was a barbecue place before and we just moved over to Tara Boulevard for a couple of years and we come back here. You know we still had the pit out there and all, so we just started it back up here.

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AH: Is it the same pit you have today?

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RD: No; uh-uh. When my dad died in '86, the EPA--he was grandfathered on the old pit. So the EPA come in, and said, "You're not grandfathered, Roger." They said, "You got to build a new cooker, you know, so with the big chimney and all that." His was an open-air pit, which means it's just a little pit with, you know, smoke going every which a way. But the one I built had controlled heat, controlled--you know, it's got the firebox on one end, the meat in the middle, and the chimney on the other end, and it's controlled pretty well. So but, that's the EPA ruling, so--.

00:12:46

AH: How big was that old open-air pit?

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RD: It would hold about 30 hams, and so my new one will hold 50. So you know, that's about-- you know, it's a difference of about 20 hams, so--.

00:12:58

AH: Do you remember when you first started working here?

00:13:03

RD: Well [*Laughs*]*--*excuse me for laughing because I was 18 months old, and Mama had to tie me in a chair the first day we opened because I was trying to help her so much. I was pulling stuff out from under the counter and everything. So she put me in the corner over at the back door and tied me tight*--*put an apron me and tied the apron around the chair. So I was trapped. So I guess you could say I started working here the first day. [*Laughs*]

00:13:27

But I grew up here and when*--*I remember when I wanted to be*--*I was the next to the youngest child, and I wanted to be a curb hop. So when I was nine years old*--*I was big for my age*--*Daddy went out with me, and we took an order. And the guy ordered, of all things, a cup of coffee and a barbecue. So when I took the tray to hang it up on the*--*the car, I tilted it forward too much, and the coffee went out*--*and went in his lap. So, Daddy told him*--*he was apologizing. He said, “I’m trying to teach him how to curb, and if you’ll, you know, send me the laundry bill, I’ll pay for your cleaning and all.” But the guy laughed and said, “No damage.” He said, “You know, he’s got to learn somehow.” And so that’s the first customer I waited on. I poured hot coffee in his lap, so*--*.

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AH: Did your dad keep*--*let you keep working after that?

00:14:15

RD: Oh yeah; he*--*he just told me, he said, “Son, don’t tilt the tray so much when you hang it on the car.” And so from*--*say the time I was nine or ten years old until I was about 16, I curbed. And then I got in a little argument with Daddy one time, and I told him I didn’t need this place. I could do*--*I was making about \$35 a week with tips and salary. And so I told Daddy I didn’t need

it. And I--I went to Jonesboro to a Western Auto Store and got a job making 35-cents an hour and working after school and all. So at a Saturday night, I’d get a check for about \$7.50. So I cut my own throat just to prove to Daddy I didn't have to have this.

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But and my best buddy took over my job as curb hop, and he would pay for everything we did because I didn't have no money. **[Laughs]** You know, but that’s the way--that’s the way I started. I mean, I’ve just been in and out of it all my life and so--.

00:15:12

AH: Are y'all still open 24 hours?

00:15:14

RD: No; we--we quit opening 24 hours when the--when we moved back from Jones--from over on Tara Boulevard to here. We closed on Monday; we was open Tuesday through Sunday and opened from 10:00 to 10:00. And then as--as my dad got older and he had some health problems we--he--he just opened Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. But you know, he--he closed Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and opened Thursday, Friday, and Saturday for, I guess, 10 years we was doing that--was just opening three days a week.

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And when he decided that he wanted one of his boys in here to help him, he chose me. I don’t--I don’t know why; I think he hated me the worst. So he chose me to come in and--so in ’76 I come in with him and so--.

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AH: So what were you doing in '76 when he called you to come work with him?

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RD: I worked for the State Revenue Department from 1962 until '76.

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AH: And in '76 you were how old?

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RD: Thirty--thirty; yeah, 30--31, yeah, somewhere around 30 years old. And so I come in with him, and so he was--he told me he was going to stay here until he was about 95 and help me. So '76 I come in full-time and then in '83 Mama died, and then in '86 he died. So he left me holding the bag so to speak, so--.

00:16:42

AH: Was that--it was 1976, the first time you were in the kitchen?

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RD: Oh, no. I was--I was raised in here. You know I do--I was making stew and sauce when I was 15--16 years old. You know, I'd just go and make the stew and sauce and stuff like that. And then when--you know, he was still a fairly young man, so when I got out of high school, I went to work for the State Revenue Department until '76 and so--.

00:17:09

AH: What did you do for them?

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RD: I was an agent. I was an agent with them, and so, but I worked there for years, so--.

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AH: What was the menu like when you were working here as--as a child?

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RD: Well, back in them days we--we had hotdogs and hamburgers and barbecue and cheeseburgers and stuff like--you know, Brunswick stew and stuff. But then, in 19--I guess it’s about ’78 or ’79, Daddy said, “Well, I’m going to let McDonald’s have the hamburger business, and I’m going to go into the barbecue.” So he went to barbecue only. So our menu is very simple now; it’s just barbecue and Brunswick stew and sauce. We make the barbecue, the Brunswick stew, and the sauce, and everything else we bring in from, you know, suppliers. But you know, it’s mainly what it is; it’s just--it’s a barbecue place now.

00:17:59

AH: Did the name change when that menu change happened?

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RD: No; it’s just--it was Dean’s Truck Stop until about ’53 or ’54 and then we, you know, come back and changed it to Dean’s Barbecue then and it’s been Dean’s Barbecue ever since, so you know.

00:18:15

AH: So tell us about how you--I’m going to talk a little bit about the menu; tell me about what kind of cut of pork you use for your barbecue.

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RD: Well, it’s just fresh hams, and I barbecue the fresh hams, and I don’t--you know, I don’t marinate them. I don’t do nothing. I put them on the pit fresh. I cook them until they’re done, bring them in, cut them down, and that’s when we put the sauce on them--once it’s cut down. And the Brunswick stew, you know, is--is--you know, it’s a combination of pork and beef and onions and corn and tomatoes and seasonings and all. So, we make it and sell it. And then the sauce is, you know, mustard, ketchup, Worcestershire, sugar, salt, vinegar--stuff like that and so we just make it and sell it, so--.

00:18:59

AH: Why did you decide on hams as opposed to another cut?

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RD: Well hams cost more than--than shoulders and the butts, but it’s a lot better meat. It’s--you know, the shoulders are so much--they got so much fat and gristle in them, you have to throw away about half of it. And then the butts are just small hams, and they just--I don’t know; I just don’t like them. It’s just my preference is hams, so--.

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AH: Did you try other cuts and you just settled on hams or did you do hams from the beginning?

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RD: Well we started doing hams from the beginning because my daddy, you know, he barbecued way back there and he said that hams is--you get a lot more good usable meat out of a ham than you would a shoulder or a butt, so we use hams only. You know, so I’ve never--the only time I’ve ever used anything else is when there would be a shortage of hams, and I couldn’t get them, and I’d use shoulders, but I don’t like a shoulder. There’s just too much fat in them.

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AH: How many hams will you go through in a week?

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RD: Well, in the old days about 75--80, but now with the economy like it is it’s probably about 35--35 hams, so--.

00:20:01

AH: And how do you chop it up? Do you offer different kinds of--like chopped versus sliced or anything?

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RD: It’s--it’s all chopped. We--we cut--we still cut it down old-fashioned with a butcher knife, clean out all the gristle and the fat and all, and then we just, you know, just chop it up--not real

fine but just chopped up. And there’s one thing we’re proud of; nobody will get fat meat or gristle here. They’ll get nothing but all eatable meat. And so some places they go, they just, you know, chop it up with machines or whatever, and they chop up fat and everything. And so--but not fat here; that’s one thing--the onliest thing fat here is me, you know so--.

00:20:38

AH: [*Laughs*] Do you offer sandwiches or plates or both?

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RD: Sandwiches--barbecue sandwiches, barbecue plates, barbecue by the pound. That’s the-- that’s the onliest three things we sell, so--.

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AH: And only pork?

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RD: Only pork. If you want beef, I’ll shoot you the bull, and sell you pork, and you can’t tell the difference, so--.

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AH: Tell me; how would you describe the consistency of your sauce?

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RD: Well, it’s the same now as it was in 1948 and it’s you know it’s the same--the same ingredients. We make it the same way and--but one thing, Truett Cathy who owns Chick-Fil-A, he’s been a customer here since ’47, and he told me here not too long ago, “Roger, what I like about Dean’s Barbecue is I ate it in ’47, ’57, ’67, ’77, ’87, ’97, and so forth, and it’s always the same.” It is always--he said, “The sandwich I got in the late ‘40s is the same--it’s the same now as they were then.” He said, “It’s just consistency all the years it’s been--been here.”

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AH: So did you say it’s mustard-based sauce?

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RD: No; it’s a vinegar-based sauce but we use mustard, ketchup, vinegar, Worcestershire, stuff like that.

00:21:49

AH: How would you describe the consistency? Is it thin or is it thicker?

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RD: No; it’s thin. It’s a thin sauce, and it--you know, it just--it just really saturates the meat good, so it’s not a real thick sauce, uh-uh.

00:21:58

AH: Is it your mama’s recipe?

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RD: No, actually it’s Daddy, Daddy’s recipe. Daddy, well like I say, barbecued back in ’25 down in Griffin, and so he come--you know, he would work--he worked from a sauce thing that he had there, so--. It’s--that’s what it is; it’s Dad’s recipe.

00:22:16

AH: Do you remember the name of that place down in Griffin?

00:22:19

RD: Yes, Griffith Barbecue--Griffith Barbecue in Griffin, Georgia. And but they--they was at what they called [Wrigley’s] Curve and they went out of business during the Depression and never opened back up, so that’s what it was; so--.

00:22:34

AH: And tell us about the Brunswick stew; is that your dad’s recipe, too?

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RD: Yeah; uh-huh, the Brunswick stew is--you know, it’s--it’s pretty consistent with--from ’48 until now. I mean, it’s about the same as it was then because we’re using the same recipe, the same materials, everything, so--. That’s what it--you know, it’s just--some people like it; some people don’t but you know--.

00:22:59

AH: What do people like about it?

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RD: Well, they say it’s good. That’s all I can tell you. *[Laughs]* You know, I don’t know why people like barbecue or why they like Brunswick stew but we have a--a base of customers, probably about 250 that’s regular, you know, that’s regular customers. And then we have people all the time--there was a show; they did a show in 2005 called Atlanta’s Best Barbecue Kissed by Fire. And so the--I thought the show was going to be local but it’s played in Chicago. It’s played in Dallas. It’s played in Los Angeles. It’s played in Miami. And you know, I’ve had people--a lady called me from Baton Rouge, Louisiana one time wanting to know if I delivered. I told her no. *[Laughs]* You know, and people has called me from Miami Beach and Chicago and places like that, and so, this--they--the PBS network, has showed it all over the United States. And so I get a lot of customers, even now; they’ll play the show about once a month on PBS and people come in and say, “Well, I saw you on TV the other night, you know.” And I said, “Okay, well that’s not a new show. I had more hair then.”

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And so, but they--it’s a show that they’ve played for five years now, and it’s--it’s really done good, so--.

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AH: Do you have an idea of how your barbecue might be different or the same to other kinds of styles of barbecue around Georgia?

00:24:23

RD: Mine is the best; that’s all. You know, I don’t know. Back in ’99 the Federal government passed a law and if you opened a barbecue place from ’99 until now you have to use indoor cookers. You know, you have to do the cooking, the electric cooking with them. And I don’t think that’s a really good way to barbecue, because there’s, you know, no smoke, no heat, you know, it’s just--I could cook it in the oven just as easy. So, I’ve got the old timey--well in that program they did on PBS, they said I was--they did 12 barbecue places, and I was the only one out of the 12 that had an open-air--open-air pit. They said, you know a true pit is--is Dean’s and I’m grandfathered on it thank goodness.

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AH: Have you seen those electric cookers?

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RD: Yeah; and yeah, if--if something ever happened to me or if the pit fell down I got to put electric cookers in here. So, I’m trying to keep the pit patched up and keep it going.

00:25:27

AH: Can you describe for us how the electric is different?

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RD: Well it’s just--let’s see; how would you explain it? Okay, if you’re going to barbecue a steak out on the grill or you’re going to put in a frying pan and fry it that’s the difference, you know. There’s a difference; there’s a big difference in the flavor than you know than--than what you get with, you know, the cookers are--are just baking it, actually baking it, and, you know,

you don’t get a whole lot of smoke flavor, and you don’t--you know. I don’t know; it’s just--it’s something different.

00:26:04

It’s just like people--one--one barbecue place in Georgia, I won’t call his name, they went from barbequing over an open pit, like I got, to the cookers, and they--well they got a machine. They put it in--put the hams in on racks, and they shoot steam into them for about three hours, and then they put them in a rotisserie, a big old rotisserie, and they bake them. And I asked the man one time; I said, “How do you get the smoke flavor?” He said, “Oh, that’s very simple. I--I put my buns and bread over a charcoal grill in the kitchen.” He said the smoke is in the bread. And that ain’t--you know, that’s no way to barbecue. I mean, you can cut corners any way you want to, but I’m just--my hams, I take about 15--16 hours before--before I ever serve them. I mean, they cook slow, 15--16 hours and that’s--that’s what it does, so--.

00:26:56

AH: Did you design your pit?

00:26:58

RD: Yeah, I did. I made a few mistakes on it but I designed it. And when--when my dad died, he died on Christmas--Thanksgiving morning back in ’86, and that was on Thursday. And we buried him on Saturday, and then the following Tuesday I was out here doing work, and the EPA pulled up, two jack-tails in suits and all, and said, “Mr. Dean, we’re sorry to hear about your daddy, but you got to tear that pit down.”

00:27:23

AH: They didn't waste time.

00:27:24

RD: Yeah; they--I said, “Man, you didn't let--let his body get cold.” They said, “Well you know he was grandfathered on this old pit here, and you’re not, so we got to ask you to tear it down.” And so, they gave me 60 days. So, I went around out back and made a temporary pit until I built the one that’s there. So, I built it, and--and cured it, and then I started cooking on it about 60 days later, so--.

00:27:48

AH: How do you cure a pit?

00:27:49

RD: Well, when you use firebrick and mortar and then regular brick and all, you have to not start right away on it. You can't just build it and cook on it. You have to build small fires in the fire box and let it burn, and then a couple--the next day put another small fire in there and let it burn, and you know, get the pit cured out all the way through. And then you can put a bunch of wood on it and cook your meat. But you know, it takes about 30 days to cure it.

00:28:18

AH: What happens if you don’t cure it?

00:28:19

RD: It’ll fall apart. [*Laughs*] It starts falling apart on you, so--. But you know, that’s--that’s about all.

00:28:26

AH: You said you made a couple of mistakes. What would you have done different knowing what you know now?

00:28:31

RD: Well, when I made it, you know, I made the pit out there, and I put the concrete floor down. And then, I--I put a--two little pieces of plywood where--under where the meat would be so the grease would drip and run. But I put the pit on top of the concrete, and I should have built the pit and then put the concrete around it, because it leaks out from under the--the grease leaks out from under the edges in the front and all, and if I’d have put it in the ground like I should have instead of on top of the concrete, it wouldn’t have done that. So, that’s one of the mistakes I made, so--.

00:29:08

AH: So you said you--you cook your hams for 18 hours. When do you--what does that process; when do you start that?

00:29:12

RD: Well—well, like I say, today, Tuesday, I go to the meat house about 1:30--2 o’clock. I’ll get my hams, bring them back, put them on, and my son--he just works three days a week, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday; and Tuesday he works all day long and all night. Wednesday

he’s off; then Thursday he works all day long and all night. And then he’s off on Friday and then he comes back and works Saturday. So he cooks two nights a week; he--he’s here 23 hours a day Tuesday and Thursday. And then, he’s nine hours on Saturday. So he does all the cooking for me. I used to do it myself, but since I had the stroke I just can't do it. And so he’s cooking like that now.

00:29:59

AH: So, he was here from what--7:00 to 6:00?

00:30:01

RD: He’s here from about 8 o'clock this morning until about 7 o'clock in the morning. And so you know we close at 4:00 on Tuesday and, so he just goes in the cooking--. You know, we put the meat on around 2:00--2:30, and he cooks all night long and in the morning, and we’ll have them all ready. And so, we, you know, take some and put it up in the cooler and the rest of them move around and just go sell them.

00:30:25

AH: What’s his name?

00:30:26

RD: Chris; yeah.

00:30:28

AH: Do you have other children?

00:30:28

RD: Yes; I have a daughter, Tiffany but she’s working in school--at--she works for the school, so--.

00:30:33

AH: How did--how did you get Chris to come work with you?

00:30:38

RD: Well, the process of elimination you know. He was in the Army and he was in Desert Storm in '91, and then he come out of the Army. He went to work for Delta. And then, you know, it was a temporary employee, but they never hired him on full-time. Then he worked--worked for Nippon; it’s an express company, and he worked there for a while. And then Coca-Cola was hiring, so he went to work for Coca-Cola. And it was a temporary job. And then, I said, “Son, you can come down here and--.” So he started helping me on Saturday at first in about '94-'95. And then he said, “Well Dad, I don’t like this job at Coca-Cola. I’m just going--I’d like to come with you.” So he quit and come here in about '95, and he’s been here ever since. And so, and then I got my niece. She’s been working here for 27 years, and I got a lady that works with me, named Barbara; she’s been here for 35 years. And then my nephew, he’s, you know, part-time. He’s here about—well, about 20 years. He’s been here about 20 years. So you know it’s--I get somebody here, I keep them until they die.

00:31:52

AH: [*Laughs*] What are your niece and nephew’s names?

00:31:54

RD: It’s Jane and Mike--Jane and Mike--Jane is married to my nephew Mike, and yeah, she’s been here since ’83, I think it was. Yeah; ’83 she come--and right out of high school, and she was--she turned 18 the week after she come to work here, so--.

00:32:18

AH: Are they--is that all the employees you have--those four people?

00:32:20

RD: Yeah; right now. I’ve got a little--my grandson helps me a little part-time, because he’s a plumber and the plumbing business is kind of dead right now. So he helps me part-time occasionally, and then Mike, you know he’s part-time. But I’ve got me, Chris, Barbara, and Jane is the full-time employees. And then we--at one time this place used to have seven employees full-time but it was--. You know, when we’d get ready to open the door especially like I say Saturday morning, they’d be lined out down--down the sidewalk like it was a theater trying to get in. But it--the economy the last three or four years has gone south, and the restaurant business feels it first. And what’s amazing is, when it’s a bad economy, the theater business goes up because people want to get away from reality, and so they’ll take in a movie.

00:33:12

And but the restaurant business, we’ve had 32 restaurants go out of business in Clayton County in the last two years--32 of them. And so, I’m--I’m lucky to still be here. I just you know if I hadn’t--if I didn’t have longevity on my side and some--you know, like I say, about 250 regular customers, you know, I don’t know if I’d have made it or not. You know, we’ve got four

other barbecue places in Clayton County that’s gone belly up in the last two years, so you know--

00:33:40

AH: Describe your clientele to me. Who--what kinds of folks are regulars here?

00:33:43

RD: Rednecks. [*Laughs*] You know we--one time, I come out from my house and I looked across here, and there was 17 vehicles and every one of them was pickup trucks. So I call it “Redneck--Redneck Heaven,” you know. But we have--no, we have--my wife wrote that little poem, *Old Traditions Begin*--there. And it’s--you know, the doctors, the lawyers, the judges, the, you know, Military people, the construction people, just, you know, a little bit of every--I’ve got a mixture of all. You know, like one of my regular customers every week is--is one of the Superior Court judges up here in Clayton County. He’s here every week. When he walks in the door I know what he wants, you know, but I just turn around; I say, “Bill wants a barbecue, a Coke and a chip, you know.” And so then, I’ve got a couple other judges that come down, and then I’ve got police and Sheriff’s Department employees, and I don’t know, just--and then construction workers. The construction workers have not been around like they used to because they’re not working. But I got you know from the Courthouse, Jonesboro, offices around Jonesboro and all, and then all the people who work around and out and about that’s just--it’s the mixture. It’s just not one--one certain people; it’s a mixture.

00:35:04

AH: How has this building changed since you took it over back when you were about 30?

00:35:08

RD: Well it’s got older. *[Laughs]*

00:35:11

AH: Has it expanded at all?

00:35:12

RD: Well, this room we’re in, my dad didn't have this room or that walk-through, there. And so, when he--he used to have a bunch of picnic tables out here. And then some, you know, some stools in there. It was real small. And so when he died, and he--my dad was, I guess you could say, a bigot because he just, you know, he was raised in the Old South. And so, he just didn't want certain races mixing together. So he refused to build a place like this. And so after he died, I talked to a builder, who was, at the time--was my son-in-law, and we built--me and him built this room and closed it in and did everything, put the concrete on the floor. And so this room is--is my--my little dream right here.

00:36:02

AH: So that was the late ‘80s?

00:36:03

RD: That was in ‘87 or--yeah, ‘87 or ‘88--‘87 is when we built this.

00:36:10

AH: What is it about running a barbecue place that’s kept you working here since--for so long?
What is it that you--that keeps you here day after day?

00:36:19

RD: I like to eat, you know. I’m--I’m right at the age of retiring and, but I don’t know if I’m going to retire. I just keep having these strokes and all, but I’m--you know basically I’m set except for the little cerebral hemorrhages I’ve been having. I’m pretty basically, you know, a healthy guy. And so, I’m just going to hang around until the good Lord calls me home or--or you know or 90, whichever comes first.

00:36:49

AH: But what it is about your job that you enjoy?

00:36:52

RD: The people--the people that come in. I like to cut up and, you know, flirt and cut up and carry on with everybody. And, you know, I got this thing for these old widowed women in all of Jonesboro. They come in and I say, “Honey, I’m still hunting you that husband. I want you to be as happy as I am,” you know, and, you know, stuff like that. And, you know, just--I got some old widow women, they come down, and say, “Well, we was going to see what you was up to this time,” you know. And so, you know, that’s about--that’s about it, so--.

00:37:19

AH: Is there anything else you want to tell us about your--your place here?

00:37:26

RD: Well, I can't think of much more. I just pretty well told you. This is my grandson, Trey.
And just--but you wanted to talk to Chris just a minute, right?

00:37:35

AH: Yeah; if you don't mind.

00:37:38

RD: Okay; let me get him.

00:37:39

AH: I sure appreciate you sitting down.

00:37:41

RD: Okay; let me get--.

* * *

00:37:41

AH: So I'm sitting down with Chris Dean. Chris, will you--

00:37:43

Christopher Dean: Christopher Dean; don't say Chris Dean because it sounds like Christine.

[Laughs]

00:37:47

AH: Got it. So if you would state your full name and your occupation for the record?

00:37:50

CD: It’s James Christopher Dean, and I am the Manager at Dean’s Barbecue.

00:37:53

AH: And what’s your date of birth?

00:37:55

CD: Do I have to tell you that--April 12, 1968. *[Laughs]*

00:38:00

AH: So how long have you been working here?

00:38:02

CD: Altogether since--I came here--I was working a full-time job around the airport back in 1993. I had been there for about three years, and so I came here just part-time just on Saturdays in '93 and did that for about—until, I guess, it was about February of '96. And then I came here full-time in February of '96.

00:38:21

AH: Did you work here at all as--as a kid?

00:38:22

CD: No; because actually I was--I was practically grown when my dad got this place. I graduated in 1986, and we--I--and he--my grandfather died in '86, and we moved down here. He died actually on Thanksgiving Day--did I say '96--'86 yeah. And so, I was--yeah; I was--I was pretty much grown up. I resisted working for the family business for a long time. I was like, you've got to live with family; you don't want to work with family, too. But actually, I didn't come here until I was about--I guess, I was about 20--do the math--I'm not good at math. But I was--I worked many other jobs. I joined the Army. I did lots of other jobs before I came here. I didn't come here—actually, I came here in--full-time in '96 because I had quit my regular full-time job and got an opportunity to go to Paris for the summer. And I was like, “I’m gone.”

[Laughs] I quit my job and put everything in storage and took off. And when I came back, you can imagine, I had like \$5,000--\$6,000 on a credit card. I was like, “Ugh,” and Dad was like, “Why don't you come here, you know, for a temporary job, just long enough to get back on your feet.” Well almost **[Laughs]**--what is it--almost 15 years later, I guess I haven't got on my feet yet because I'm still here. **[Laughs]**

00:39:29

AH: So was it--is it accurate to say you kind of came on hesitantly?

00:39:35

RD: Oh, very much so. I mean, my sister worked out here you know. She's worked out here on and off since she was I think about 15 years old. And she's--let me see; she's three years younger than me. So she's 39 now. And so, but I'd always resisted. I'd just you know--it wasn't--I didn't look down my nose at it; I mean, it definitely put--puts food on the table, you know, and it's been

here for a long time. But it’s just not what I wanted to do. And so, **[Laughs]** like he said, “Come on here for a temporary job until you get on your feet.” And one year led to another.

00:40:02

You know, just like most people, you know, who start their jobs and don’t plan to stay there forever and a decade goes by **[Laughs]**, and you’re just like, you know, the blink of an eye, you know.

00:40:10

AH: So, have you been working in the kitchen the whole time?

00:40:12

CD: Yeah; well actually, I started--I started out more as backup. I was like handing out orders, working in the barbecue pit and stuff, and I didn't work on the table. I didn't deal with, you know, making sandwiches or cutting the meat at all. And well, going back farther than that--further than that--excuse me; English was my thing--I was like farther--no, no, no. We’re not talking about distance here; we’re talking about time. Going back further, when I first started here, I was hired just work the register on Saturdays. But when I came in full-time in '96, I was just basically backup, and I would jump on the register, you know, here and there. But little by little, as we’ve lost people, people have died; pretty much the only way you can get out of this place is to die--but we’ve had--you know because we had a lot of old ladies working here who were not so old when they came here, but people have died and so, then you step up and take on you know another responsibility and another job, and--so now I do it all.

00:41:06

You know, about, oh Lord, I guess about eight--nine years ago, I started messing--you know piddling around with the meat because I had been watching them do it. I was like I can do this. So whenever they stepped out or were eating lunch or whatever, I--I can handle this. And now--now I’m a meat cutter. And so, one of my other co-workers, Jane, who is my cousin’s wife, she said, “Don’t do it. You’ll wish”--because she didn't start out as a meat cutter either. She said, “You’ll be stuck here forever. You--you’ll wish you hadn’t.” Yeah; now **[Laughs]**—yeah, as I started out as like back up meat cutter. Now, like Tuesdays, I am the meat cutter. Some Saturdays, our busiest day, I am the meat cutter, so--.

00:41:43

AH: And your dad says you work over--over night a couple days a week.

00:41:47

CD: Yeah; I work--my schedule is really weird. We’re closed Sundays and Mondays. Tuesday I come in at 8:00 and then you know we’re closed at 4:00 on Tuesdays. And then I stay--I stay and cook meat all night long. So, Tuesday is a 23-hour day; off Wednesday. He comes out--he comes out and relieves me at like 7 o'clock Wednesday morning, and then I go home, and then come back Thursday, another 23-hour all day/all night, off Fridays and then Saturday he opens up. We have the meat already cooked, and so it’s just the night. So I get 55 hours in like three days’ time.

00:42:15

AH: So what’s involved with cooking overnight? What do you do while you’re here?

00:42:19

CD: Set the clock and sleep. *[Laughs]* No; no, he goes and--he goes to the meat house probably about--like after our lunch rush today he’ll go get 24--usually about 24 hams, 24 to 32 hams, something like that. And we’ll load them on the pit and just get the fire going really good, just loaded down with wood. And basically, I mean, there’s--there’s no science to it. You just keep throwing wood on the fire. You don’t want to over--you don’t want to cook it too fast, because then what will happen is the outside will burn up and the inside will still be raw. So I mean, you just have to keep it slow and steady basically, keep a good fire going. And then, I guess when it gets around midnight, sometimes 1 o’clock in the morning, the front row is looking like it’s starting to what we call turn, starting to, you know, starting to actually get cooked through and through.

00:43:06

AH: How--what does that look like? How can you tell?

00:43:08

CD: When they’re raw they’re much bigger. They shrink down because there’s a lot of water, you know, and so, when they shrink down--when they start shrinking down and they’re not as heavy you can--I’ve been doing it so long, you can just pick up a ham and tell, you know, if--if it’s starting to get lighter, you’re like, “Okay, it’s getting ready.” And then I’ll take that row and take it--the front row--and take it to the back row and get it away from the fire because the firebox is in the front. And bring the back row, which needs more cooking, which is not as done, bring back--just basically rotating it. And then, it gets about 1:00 or 1:30, and I can’t keep my eyes open because it’s a long day, you know, I just make sure the fire is going really good, kick

back in the recliner, and I set the--set my alarm on my phone for like an hour--hour and a half, something like that. It depends on how it’s looking.

00:43:55

In the wintertime, it’s colder and so there’s a--the wind going through there across the pit, so it takes longer for it cook in the wintertime, so, in the wintertime I really have to--last week for instance-- Well, let me see; the week before last, the week before last is when we started having cooler weather and I really had to-- I was like, “Oh, I better--I can’t do an hour and a half. I better get back up in an hour.” So I’m up and down all night and just, you know, putting wood on the fire. And, as it gets closer to dawn, I can pretty much slow it down, you know. And he comes out at 7:00; so usually about 6 o'clock I look and see if like the third and fourth row need to be rotated or whatever needs to be rotated. And--and the trick and it takes a while--is to learn not to burn it up because you want to get it done. And if you don’t--it’s--it’s, you know, kind of crazy because, if you push it too hard, it burns up. If you don’t push it hard enough, then you’ve got raw meat the next day, and that’s not a good thing you know.

00:44:47

AH: What kind of temperature do you try to keep the pit at?

00:44:50

CD: That I don’t know. *[Laughs]*

00:44:51

AH: Just instinctive?

00:44:52

CD: I’ve been doing it so long. Yeah; you just keep it--I mean we keep the pit loaded down with wood.

00:44:58

AH: And you use--what kind of wood do you use?

00:44:58

CD: Hickory and oak; hickory and oak. Actually he--he had a huge oak tree in front of the house, and it--it was--the lightning had hit it about four or five years ago, and little by little it had, you know--it was dying. And people were like, “You better take the tree down. So he just--I mean, it was huge, probably 50--60-foot tall, oak--big oak tree, probably hundreds of years--a couple hundred--you know, who knows how old it was? And he said he remembers it when he was a little boy and it was that tall then, and he’s 63. But they just took that down.

00:45:27

Actually we are--we’re burning that, too, so it was like, you know, waste not want not.

00:45:31

AH: So have you always used hickory and oak?

00:45:32

CD: Hickory and oak; yeah.

00:45:34

AH: And describe what the hams--you said that the size changes. Does the color change also?

00:45:40

CD: Yeah; I mean it’s more--before it gets all the way done, it’s more like a brown color and almost like a red color, and you can see the fat. You can see the fat on the side, and you’re like, “That is not ready. Look at--look at that right there.” You can just tell by, you know, looking at it. And then when it gets done, on this--on these open-air pits like this it’s--it’s blackened. The outside is blackened. So when we come in we pull back the skin, the--you know the--the blackened part. And then you’ve got tender meat inside.

00:46:10

AH: What do you like about your job?

00:46:14

CD: **[Laughs]** In this--in this economy stability, the stability, you know, which who is to say. I mean, we may not be here forever, but I’ve been here almost 15 years, and I’ve seen a lot of people with Masters degrees and, you know, really career jobs; those jobs come and go--being laid off, companies folding up, and so, you know, it’s a family business, and so there’s a lot more--it’s a lot more relaxed than--. I’ve been out of the--the work force or the real work force so long where you have to go in and punch a time clock and have the button up shirt and the tie and stuff like that, and at this point that’s not me. **[Laughs]** That’s not me. If--if I had to do something different now it would have to be something you know more casual. It couldn’t be something--.

00:47:01

I did leave here actually. I got a job with Coca-Cola. It was a temp to perm job; originally this was supposed to be a temporary job. And so I think I had been here for about two years and I got--it took me forever to go through a temp agency and get a temp to perm job. And I went there one day, and I hated it. I mean, you had to wear suits. I mean, you had to wear suits every day. Well, I had--owned one suit to my name and actually, still do, you know, which it probably doesn't even fit anymore. But so, I bought some button up shirts. I was like, "I'm going to have to wear this same shirt--suit every day," and it was just stuffy. And I was used to being around a barbecue pit, and they were dressed to the nines. And it was a customer service job for Coca-Cola. And they recorded your phone calls all day and the first, you know, the first day of the training, you're sitting--it was probably about 30--40 people sitting around a huge like a [Unintelligible] table. You had these fake phones in front of you, and the trainers would get up there. And you didn't know--I mean, I was going, "Please, don't be me!" And you know, they would just at random dial a phone--dial--dial your phone. And if it was you, you picked it up and had to play along like how you would handle an irate customer. And then you had like 40 eyes on you. So, I called Dad during break, and I was--he was like, "How's it going?" I said, "I hate it." [He said,] "Well, maybe it'll get better." I said, "I don't--I do not need another day to know this is--this is not it; this is not the one."

00:48:24

AH: So you came back to barbecue?

00:48:25

CD: Well, he said, "Well just, you know, you might like it. You know if--if you go permanent, you know, it's a good-paying job, so, maybe you should stick it out." So, I called my sister, and

she was like managing at the time. And I said, “I hate it.” She said, “Well, get your butt back here tomorrow.” And I said, “Well....” She said, “I’ll take care of Dad. Don’t worry.” So she called Dad. She was like, “Well Dad I hired someone to replace Chris.” And he said, “What--what? I just hired somebody to replace Chris.” And she said--he said, “Who did you hire?” She said, “My brother.” He said--she said, “Who did you hire?” He said, “My son.” And so, he said, “Tell him to get his butt back here. I’m tired.” And that was just one day without me being here.

00:49:04

So he called me for a long time. I’m getting older now, but when I first started, he called me, and I hated it. He called me “his grunt” because I did all the grunt work; you know, I did all the heavy lifting. I took it all off him. Of course, he’s had a stroke now, so now he definitely needs me more than ever.

00:49:19

AH: Do you think you’ll stick it out for a while?

00:49:21

CD: *[Laughs]* Unless a great job with, you know, 401K and benefits. We don’t have benefits here, which is a major drawback. Unless something like that falls out of the sky or I hear about it and, you know--I guess like anybody. I don’t plan to be here forever, but I don’t have any immediate plans, you know. Unless something great comes along, and there’s--in this day in time there’s a lot of competition for anything great, you know so--.

00:49:47

AH: How do you describe your barbecue to somebody who may not have eaten here before?

00:49:51

CD: It’s--it’s old-fashioned. I mean, because most barbecue places now they put everything through like a--like a processor, you know, and they put the good with the bad--I mean the bad with the good. They put the fat; they put the gristle. And we--ours is hand-cut; we actually cut it. We take the--this is gross, but take the veins out, take away the fat, take away the gristle, you know, scrape it down so there’s nothing--you get no fat or gristle or veins--nothing like that.

00:50:20

AH: How would you describe your sauce?

00:50:23

CD: It’s more like a--I guess it would be like Carolina-style sauce because it’s vinegar-based. It’s not thick sauce, and a lot of people prefer the thicker sauce. But it’s--it’s light; it’s vinegary and it’s maybe a little bit spicy, but it’s not--I wouldn’t say it’s hot, you know.

00:50:42

AH: Do you--is there--?

00:50:44

CD: The sauce makes it, though. I’m sorry to interrupt, but the sauce is--we’re really know for our sauce. We sell the sauce by--people come in especially over the holidays and buy it by the gallons. And not just for, you know, the holidays; people come and get it for--it’s great on barbecue chicken, ribs, pork chops--anything like that.

00:51:01

AH: But y'all just do the pork here?

00:51:03

CD: Yeah; just do the pork, yeah.

00:51:04

AH: And how would you describe Georgia barbecue if someone asked you to do it?

00:51:08

CD: I think Georgia barbecue is probably better--you know, I know Texas is supposed to be known for their barbecue, but I think Texas is more known for their beef brisket. Is that how you say it--beef brisket--beef brisket? And I've had some good barbecue in Georgia and not so good barbecue in Georgia. But I think, you know--I think Georgia does a really good barbecue. And of course, we've been here 63 years, so that's a testament that we're doing something right, you know. **[Laughs]** But it's--it's--it's slow-cooked. It's not, you know--most of these barbecue places now have to have the electric cookers because of EPA regulations and everything, because of the environment. But we're grandfathered in, and so we can still have the open-air. Most places don't have this unless they're grandfathered in. So, it just changes the taste of the meat when you can cook outdoors like that and have the oak and the hickory and slow-cook it for you know 14--16 hours. It changes the taste.

00:52:03

AH: How does it change the taste in your mind? Have you had barbecue that’s cooked electrically?

00:52:07

CD: Yes; and it’s more like in electric cookers it’s--it doesn’t—well, first of all you don’t get that hickory smoked flavor as--as much. You know, I--I know like these electric smokers, they got a place where you can--they can put wood in the front just to kind of give it the flavor. Well, we actually cook off our wood; you know, our wood in--as far as what cooks it, so--. And it’s just more tender; it’s more tender. I think in the electric cookers, it’s more like ham like you do in the oven. It’s more sliced. And sometimes people come in here and ask for sliced and we can’t really do sliced because it’s so tender after cooking it over the fire that when you cut into it, it just kind of falls apart. And so, it’s just more tender and got a better smoked flavor you know.

00:52:47

AH: Is there anything else you want to tell us about Dean’s Barbecue?

00:52:49

CD: Any publicity is you know--any--especially free publicity is great, so if you know--I would say that if anyone wants to get old-fashioned barbecue like you can’t really find in a lot of places now because of, you know, these kinds of pits being non-existent now, they should come here and try us because it’s really, you know, good barbecue. Most everyone that I’ve heard who has come out of State or come from long distances and have tried us, seen it--they’ve seen it on like in the AJC or that PBS or PBA show that we did recently--they’re always satisfied. They--they keep coming back for more. So if you want good barbecue come out and try it because you--I

don’t think they’ll be disappointed. We don’t have a big menu. It’s a very small, simple menu, but the barbecue is really, really good.

00:53:35

AH: Well thanks so much for your time.

00:53:35

CD: Thank you. And for someone who didn't have a lot to say I sure did talk your--I filled up your recorder didn't I? [*Laughs*]

00:53:40

AH: No; that’s great. Thank you.

00:53:41

[End Roger & Christopher Dean Interview]