

**TAMARA CALHOUN**  
**Employee, The Shanty Restaurant**  
**Cleveland, MS**

\* \* \*

Location: The Shanty's kitchen-Cleveland, MS

Date: June 23, 2005

Length: 10 minutes, 17 seconds

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Project: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail

*NOTE: There are two other women working I the kitchen during this interview, and they can be heard in the background from time to time.*

**[Begin Tamara Calhoun.mp3]**

0:00:00.9

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, June twenty-third, 2005. And I'm in Cleveland, Mississippi, at The Shanty Restaurant & Grapeland Store with Tamara Calhoun, the tamale maker here. Tamara, would you mind saying your name for the record, please ma'am?

0:00:25.9

**Tamara Calhoun:** Tamara Calhoun.

0:00:27.6

**AE:** And are you from Cleveland originally?

0:00:28.9

**TC:** No, ma'am. I'm from Shelby, Mississippi.

0:00:31.6

**AE:** All right. When did you end up in Cleveland?

0:00:34.6

**TC:** Well, I actually still live in Shelby; I just work in Cleveland [Shelby is about sixteen miles north of Cleveland].

0:00:37.5

**AE:** Oh, okay--okay.

0:00:39.6

**TC:** It's like thirteen miles from here.

0:00:40.2

**AE:** Okay. And may I ask your age and your birth date, too, so we can have that?

0:00:43.7

**TC:** I'm thirty-one years old, and my birthday is November the seventh, 1973.

0:00:48.2

**AE:** Okay. And how long have you been working here at The Shanty?

0:00:52.0

**TC:** Two years on the seventh of next month [July].

0:00:56.0

**AE:** And you're the tamale maker here.

0:00:56.8

**TC:** Yes, ma'am.

0:00:57.3

**AE:** Have you always been the tamale maker here?

0:00:59.7

**TC:** Yes, I have.

0:01:02.5

**AE:** Did you learn here on the job, or did you know how to make them before?

0:01:03.9

**TC:** Learned on the job.

0:01:04.0

**AE:** Oh, okay.

0:01:06.0

**TC:** I already knew how to make tamales. Everybody makes them different so--

0:01:09.8

**AE:** Yeah. How did you learn to make them originally?

0:01:11.7

**TC:** Watching a friend of mine's grandmother.

0:01:15.2

**AE:** Okay.

0:01:16.9

**TC:** She used—I think she used pork.

0:01:20.3

**AE:** Yeah, and what was her name? Can you share her name?

0:01:21.1

**TC:** Guyton--Miss Goldstone--we just call her Miss Goldstone [pronounced *Gold-stun*].

0:01:24.4

**AE:** Goldstone?

0:01:25.2

**TC:** Goldstone, uh-hmm.

0:01:26.5

**AE:** Okay. Do you know how she learned to make tamales?

0:01:28.3

**TC:** No, I don't. [Laughs]

0:01:29.4

**AE:** No? Do you have an idea about tamales in the Mississippi Delta--where that tradition came from and how it stuck?

0:01:37.9

**TC:** Um-umm. No, I do not.

0:01:39.6

**AE:** Do you make hot tamales at home?

0:01:42.4

**TC:** No, I buy them from somebody else.

0:01:44.3

**AE:** Who do you buy them from?

0:01:46.2

**TC:** Miss Goldstone. [*Laughs*]

0:01:47.5

**AE:** Oh, okay. She's still making them, all right. Is she in Shelby?

0:01:49.8

**TC:** Yes.



0:01:51.8

**AE:** Okay. Does she sell them out of her house?

0:01:51.9

**TC:** Yes.

0:01:53.8

**AE:** Okay. Alrighty then. Well when you came here, what was different about the way they told you to make hot tamales?

0:02:01.8

**TC:** Instead of--of using pork, they use ground beef. That's the only difference.

0:02:06.1

**AE:** Okay. And they're--they're made in shucks here.

0:02:10.5

**TC:** And they tie them different. Like the other ones are tied at both ends like—well [tried demonstrating with the tamale she has in her hand] I can't do it like that, but it was folded at both ends. And these are left open at the [one] end, and they sit up in the pot. The other ones, you lay them down in the pot.

0:02:26.6

**AE:** Okay. And can you talk a little bit about the process from beginning to end--how you start?

0:02:30.9

**TC:** Okay. Yes, okay we boil the ground beef and once the ground beef is boiled, you know, we strain it and we add red pepper, chili powder, and cay--and a cup of garlic to the meat and tomato sauce, and we mix that together. And we put the broth from the ground beef back on the stove and let it come to a boil, and we mix it with the corn meal, which we call masa, which is corn meal, chili powder and salt. And that--that's it. And we let it sit overnight until the flavor is settled in, and then I come to work the next morning, and I begin to—well, no. After I finish with the masa, I have to soak the shucks a little while, and from there, the next morning I come in and they're ready for the--to be rolled out. Now at first we used to roll them by hand. You know, put the masa down first and then the ground beef and roll them up. But Jonathan [Vance. Owner of The Shanty and Airport Grocery] bought me the Tamale King [extruder], which is much easier. [Short laugh] Then we put the masa in the first cylinder and the ground beef in the middle

cylinder, and we press the handle, and it comes out in a roll like this [shows interviewer the extruded masa and meat resting in a corn shuck, ready to be rolled].

0:03:56.1

**AE:** All right.

0:03:56.2

**TC:** The meat is in there--in the middle.

0:03:56.6

**AE:** How long have you had that machine?

0:04:00.0

**TC:** About a year.

0:04:02.5

**AE:** Yeah, so when you first came here you were doing it all by hand?

0:04:03.8

**TC:** Yeah.

0:04:06.0

**AE:** How many do you make in a day when you make them?

0:04:08.0

**TC:** Today, I should have around--it should be around a hundred--hundred dozen. Yeah, about a hundred

0:04:16.6

**AE:** So you're a big fan of the Tamale King [extruder]? [*Laughs*]

0:04:18.7

**TC:** Yes. [*Laughs*] Yes, ma'am.

0:04:23.2

**AE:** Now when you say--back to preparing them, when you say masa, do you use--with the masa meal do you use lard or do you use some other binder or--?

0:04:32.5

**TC:** No, we just use the broth out of the--of the ground beef and add it to the--the cornmeal, chili powder, and salt--that's it.

0:04:40.7

**AE:** Is there a brand of masa that you use?

0:04:44.7

**TC:** No, you use regular cornmeal. White—regular white, self-rising cornmeal.

0:04:51.5

**AE:** Okay. And how do you personally like to eat tamales? Do you like it with a cracker or you like--?

0:04:57.5

**TC:** Basically by themselves. I add a little more hot sauce. They already, you know, kind of spicy, but I love spicy food, so I add a little hot sauce to them, and I eat them like that. But I have tried them with mustard. A lady came here and she told me [*Laughs*]--she said to add a little mustard, and I tried it, and I kind of liked it. It gave it a little zing.

0:05:15.8

**AE:** That's the first I've heard of that.

0:05:16.0

**TC:** But everybody else eats ketchup with theirs, but I tried it with the mustard, and I kind of liked it. Oh, I tried it with Ranch dressing; it was all right.

0:05:24.7

**AE:** Yeah? Do they have fried tamales here at The Shanty--fried tamales?

0:05:28.6

**TC:** No, I've never heard of those.

0:05:29.2

**AE:** No? There are a couple places--a place--the Bourbon Mall has fried tamales.

**TC:** For real?

**AE:** They have them up in Clarksdale [at Ground Zero].

0:05:36.0

**TC:** Really? I didn't know--is it Hick's in Clarksdale? Right off--before you go on the bypass?

0:05:41.3

**AE:** Hick's, yeah. Well, Ground Zero has fried [hot tamales]. I don't know that Hick's does fried, but they're around. They're good.

0:05:47.3

**TC:** I never heard of them; I might try them. Yeah. I go to Clarksdale a lot too so--

0:05:50.6

**AE:** Yeah, fried ones with Ranch dressing are real good. So what else can you tell me about tamale making?

0:05:57.4

**TC:** Well it's—it's not a whole lot. They're very popular, though.

0:06:00.8

**AE:** Yeah, you sell a lot of them here?

0:06:03.6

**TC:** We sell--most of them--we sell a whole lot of them at the Airport [Grocery, which is another restaurant in Cleveland, owned by the same man], but we sell quite a bit here, too. But they're mostly--you know, I make them for here and Airport [Grocery], and we sell most of them at Airport [Grocery].

0:06:13.6

**AE:** And you make them just on Thursdays?

0:06:17.0



**TC:** No, I make them on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

0:06:21.6

**AE:** Oh, okay. That's a lot of tamale making.

0:06:23.6

**TC:** Yes.

0:06:23.7

**AE:** So are there some other places in the Delta that have hot tamales--I know your friend in Shelby, but are there any other places you go to that have tamales that you like?

0:06:32.4

**TC:** Yes, there's--there's quite a few of them.

0:06:35.7

**AE:** Like what?

0:06:36.4

**TC:** I don't think--they not as good as ours, though, but they do them.

0:06:43.7

**AE:** Yeah, like what kind of places and where?

0:06:46.9

**TC:** I can't think of none of them places--over there across from Super Value [John's Homestyle Hot Tamales in Cleveland], they sell hot tamales and--I can't think of the name of the other place either, but I know where they are. I don't go there, but I know where they are and they sell them. They're not that good And I've eaten some in Rosedale—no, these were made out of someone's house. Seems like mostly everybody makes them up in their houses out here.

0:07:12.7

**AE:** Yeah, so what makes these different—different, do you think, from everybody else's?

0:07:17.8

**TC:** All our ingredients are fresh and we make them daily and--.

0:07:29.0

**AE:** That's the only way to do it, from scratch.

0:07:32.4

**TC:** And they—uh-huh, they're made with tender loving care! [*Laughs*] Yeah.

0:07:38.6

**AE:** Well, would you say maybe you have a style about tying your bundles or wrapping your shucks or anything like that--kind of the way--I guess, the machine kind of has its way with the *amount* of what you put in a tamale but--. [*Later, off the record, Tamara mentioned that she cuts the strings that are used to tie the tamale bundles at home, and her daughter helps her.*]

0:07:55.1

**TC:** No, you have to estimate yourself. It just comes out. And you have to estimate where to stop it at. I'm so used to doing it, it just--

0:08:06.9

**AE:** Yeah. You know.

0:08:08.0

**TC:** You know exactly when to stop and--and most of them, they come out the same length.

0:08:12.4

**AE:** Yeah? So what time did you say you get here in the morning to start making them--about six?

0:08:18.9

**TC:** Okay, well, like, I use one day to prepare them because, you know, they have to sit overnight. So on Thursday and Friday, you know, I come in around six [in the morning], and I start, and usually by eleven I'm finished, and I got anywhere between eighty-five to a hundred dozen.

0:08:32.4

**AE:** So you stand here for those hours and you use your machine, fill the tamales in the shucks, and then come over here, fold the bottoms, tie them with string--

0:08:42.6

**TC:** Yes. And oh I bag them up; I put five dozen in each bag, and I freeze them until they be ready to come pick them up.

0:08:51.0

**AE:** Okay. So after you tie all these bundles, though, you'll be steaming them in a pot?

0:08:55.0

**TC:** Yes. I don't have a pot on yet but yeah, we steam them in a pot. And they boil for like--they steam about forty-five minutes. No, we boil them for about thirty minutes, and then we let them sit there and simmer for about thirty minutes.

0:09:13.6

**AE:** Do you add anything to the water when you're steaming them?

**TC:** No.

**AE:** Because I came across a guy yesterday who puts the seasoning in the water.

0:09:19.8

**TC:** For real?

0:09:20.5

**AE:** Yeah, I hadn't heard about that yet either.

0:09:21.9

**TC:** What, they--they soaked them in it?

0:09:25.7

**AE:** Yeah. Do you have an opinion about using the corn shucks over parchment paper--people who changed over to parchment paper?

0:09:33.3

**TC:** I never—I never heard of that paper. I'm so used to corn shucks, I don't know anything but corn shucks.

0:09:38.1

**AE:** Yeah? Well you think you're going to hang out here as a tamale maker for The Shanty and Airport Grocery for a while?

0:09:44.8

**TC:** Yes, ma'am. Love it to death, sure do.

0:09:49.8

**AE:** All right.

0:09:50.2

**TC:** Of course everybody don't like my hot tamales over there but--.

0:09:54.7

**AE:** Uh-oh. [*Laughs*] All right then. Well any final thoughts about your job here?

0:10:00.6

**TC:** No. Sometimes it gets kind of hectic, when I be running back and forth but other than that, it's pretty good. They sell pretty well, so no complaints here.

0:10:12.9

**AE:** All right. Well, I appreciate you talking to me.

0:10:14.5

**TC:** Thank you!

0:10:17.6

**[End Tamara Calhoun.mp3]**