

JIM AUCHMUTEY
Atlanta, GA

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Date: January 18, 2005
Location: *Atlanta Journal Constitution* — Atlanta, GA
Interviewer: Angie Mosier, SFA Member
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 32 minutes
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Jim Auchmutey Interview]**00:00:00**

Angie Mosier: All right, this is Angie Mosier recording a founder's oral history for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, January 18th, and I'm here at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* with Jim Auchmutey. Jim, how did you come to be involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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Jim Auchmutey: Well, like all the other people who are considered founding members, I got a letter from John Egerton in—I guess it was the summer of 1998—inviting me to come to this meeting to found this organization in—in Birmingham at the—the *Southern Living* offices. And I had been writing about Southern food off and on for several years and had actually been co-author of a couple of cookbooks that had to do with Southern food and had—knew most of the people who were involved in this and had interviewed a good many of them and done stories on them. So they were trying to pull together a group of—a diverse group of people from around the region who came from the food industry, who were from universities and schools and who were—were journalists and—and other folks, who were just interested in this topic.

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And being as how I was sort of conspicuously interested in it and working at what was then and I guess still is the largest newspaper in the region, I guess it made sense to invite me to it.

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AM: Absolutely. Were you involved with either of the Southern food organizations that pre—dated the SFA, for example, the Society for the Southern—for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food or the American Southern Food Institute?

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JA: No, I really wasn't. And I had—I was aware of them and I knew that there were efforts afoot to organize something. I was most aware of the—the preservation group which I believe is the one that Scott Peacock and—and Edna Lewis were involved in here in Atlanta. And some—I knew those people and they had contacted me, but the—the fact is that they never really had their act together well enough to even go out and sort of inviting involvement from people like me. So—so no, I was not involved with those.

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AM: Did you go to the organizational meeting in Birmingham in the summer of 1999, and if so, what do you recall about it?

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JA: Well, first of all, I recall that it was the summer of 1998.

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AM: Yes, I think that was a typo, actually.

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JA: Yeah. In fact I know it was the summer of 1998 because I remember some of the stories I was working on about that time, but yes, I did go to it.

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AM: Okay, and so what do you recall about it?

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JA: Well, I remember that—to begin with I got this really funny letter from John Egerton inviting us to it. In fact, I've still got a copy of it here in my file because I'm kind of a pack—rat. And I remember that it was something that I kind of halfway wondered whether I should go to because I'm—I have a sort of healthy journalist need to want to sort of stay distanced from things. I guess I didn't know whether I wanted to be part of it or whether I wanted to write about it, and whether if I was a part of it I was somehow compromising my ability to write about it.

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And I finally decided that merely going to the thing and meeting these people and sort of expressing my opinions and—and watching what was going on was not going to compromise anything I might want to do later, and so—and so I went to it.

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I remember we had an excellent the night before the real meeting started at Frank Stitt's place. I remember that there was a, you know, very long day's session at the *Southern Living* offices there. I remember to—to be honest with you, I don't remember very much about the actual discussions, other than the fact that it was just kind of neat that this idea was finding a home in a place that made sense for it. I mean, when you

think about something like a—the Foodways Alliance, there are really only two places it seemed to me that would make sense for this to be given their interest in Southern culture, and that would be Ole Miss and—and probably the University of North Carolina. And Ole Miss stood up first, probably because John T. went to graduate school there, and it was a passion of his. So I was really happy something was happening with it.

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I remember being totally impressed with the way John Egerton sort of shepherded the thing. Egerton is a very—I'm going to say some real clichés here, but he's a very inclusive person who—one, he wanted everybody to feel like they were in the tent, and he did a very good job of sort of—of sort of shepherding this idea through its first incarnation with—with John T. who, I think, shows many of the same sorts of skills. And I remember that after it was all over we went to—was it Bob Sykes Barbecue I think and—and probably raised my cholesterol for two years after that.

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The other thing I remember is that when—when it was actually being organized at the meeting there, they asked me if I wanted to be on the board. And—and that is where I drew a line. I—I declined to do that because I thought if my name was on the board, if I was actually in any way part of a body that was supposed to make decisions for this thing, I did feel like I shouldn't write about it then. And so I declined that. And I think there were some other journalists who didn't feel that same—I don't know—slight uneasiness about that that I did but that was—that was where I needed to draw the line to feel good.

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AM: Right. What was your vision for the Southern Foodways Alliance when it began?

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JA: Well, I mean, I think the idea of having a formal organization that was—that celebrated its food and took it seriously was long overdue and—and that—that was pretty much what my idea for it was. And I use my own personal history there; there—there was a time, I mean I grew up in Atlanta, and I—you know, have certainly grew up with this food and have known about it all my life and—and dearly love it, but I—there was a time when I—I’m afraid I sort of shared the disparaging attitude that a lot of people have about it. I just thought of it as being you know—oh, that’s just that stuff I grew up with that you probably shouldn’t eat too much of because it’s got too much salt and sugar, and it’s fried.

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I remember back in the ‘80s before I had done much food writing in the mid—‘80s I had—had a few occasions to talk to John Egerton because of the books that he had done that had to do with civil rights and things like that. And I remember when I heard that he was writing a book about southern food, I kind of laughed to myself and thought, “Well, what is this going to be like the history of lard or something?” *[Laughs]* And—and you know and in retrospect I know that I, a person who grew up with this stuff, who was predisposed by tradition, region, and family to—to love it and take it seriously—didn’t. And so the fact that there were people like me out there with that attitude in the mid—‘80s dictates that there was and is a—a strong need for something like this organization.

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AM: Has your vision evolved, and if so, how?

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JA: I don't really have much to say to that. I mean my—my—I think they've done a really good job, and my—because I haven't been adamantly involved in the planning or the organization or anything like that it's—you know, my vision really hasn't evolved.

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AM: Okay. Did you attend the first Symposium in 1998, and if so, what do you recall about it?

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JA: I didn't. I've been two of the symposia, and I did not go to the first one. It was—I was actually writing a lot that fall about—I'm a generalist and a feature writer at the paper, and I do a lot of different things. And food is just an abiding interest of mine but it's certainly not all I do. And that fall I was actually writing a lot about suicide prevention—a lot of the organizations from the CDC down to survivors' groups that were involved in—in trying to reduce the suicide rate in America are from Atlanta. And as I recall, when that Symposium, the first one was going on I was actually at a Suicide Prevention Conference in Reno, Nevada, and nor did I go to the second one. The second one, I believe, was scheduled the same weekend that my family has a reunion and eats a lot of Southern food.

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I went to the one in 2000. There was about—what was it about—southern food on the road—and I went to the one in 2002 that was about barbecue. I really wish I had been able to come—go to the one this past fall about race and food, black and white, because that's a real of interest of mine and I know it's been touched on every one of these conferences. But again, I had another story I had to do, so—so I've only been to two of them so far.

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AM: Okay. Tell us about your role in developing the SFA's mission and vision and programming.

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JA: Oh, very limited. I mean, really, it's just been what I had to say at that first meeting which was not different from what John T. and everybody else had all along. I remember the thing that I kept saying to them was that I wanted us to do what you're doing right here and now, which is oral histories.

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AM: Right.

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JA: And—and not so much of people like me but—but really more of the people who are passing on, the people—the people who actually remember what it's like to kill a hog on the farm, because I sure don't. *[Laughs]*

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AM: Right. The Southern Foodways Alliance focuses upon food as culture. What does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

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JA: Well, I mean, I don't think you divorce what we eat from the rituals and meanings we attach to it. So you know it makes sense to have a—a broader view of what we're talking about with food here; otherwise you're just talking about recipes.

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What it means to me personally? I—I—I grew up with the stuff and I'm—I'm a fifth generation Georgian and my—the Auchmuteys in North Georgia are barbecue pit masters and Brunswick stew makers going back well into the 19th century. On my mother's side, the Yarboroughs in Washington County had—you know, the whole time I was growing up—they ran a slaughterhouse down there, and made some of the best hot country sausage in Middle Georgia. And I used to go with my uncle riding around on his route to all the little one light—bulb stores and little towns like Warrenton and Sparta and Milledgeville delivering that sausage. So I've kind of got pig in my blood on both sides of my family. So—actually in almost any way I can think of, almost any food that I can eat, and you know I can go down here to Thelma's or—or Son's Place and get a vegetable plate, and almost anything I get there has some association for me with something in my life or family.

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AM: Do you have ideas for the future of the organization, projects you'd like to see happen, or topics that you'd like to see studied?

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JA: Off the top of my head, not really. The—if I sat down and studied on it, I probably could think of it. I have enough trouble figuring out the next story I'm going to write, much less the future of the Southern Foodways Alliance. They seem to be doing very well without my day—to—day input. *[Laughs]*

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AM: Okay. Now we kind of move onto the personal questions about you and if you don't mind, stating the date and place of your birth.

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JA: I was born on August 29, 1955, at St. Joseph's Infirmary in downtown Atlanta, and like everything else, or like a lot of things in Atlanta, it's moved to the suburbs since then.

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AM: Please tell us about the food of your childhood—who prepared it, and what were some typical meals?

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JA: I—I grew up in—in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur and my father was an accountant at General Motors, white—collar job, and my mother was a—they both went to college. He went to Berry College in Rome and she went to Georgia Women’s College in Milledgeville where she was a classmate of Flannery O’Connor and—and switched up to Berry to finish out where she met him.

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Well, actually it was the other way around; excuse me. But at any rate, she was trained as a teacher and did teach for a while as a kindergarten teacher, but mostly was a stay—at—home mom for four children of which I am the second. So she cooked; she did all the cooking. And she—we—we used the pressure cooker a lot. We—she pressure—cooked a lot of vegetables. They were you know—if I had them now, they were probably overdone to my tastes now. I like them to more resemble the vegetable they are now. She cooked one of my favorite things—she was really good with breakfast. She cooked really nice breakfasts—pancakes and eggs and everything. She was—I remember she did really good country—fried steak with lots of black pepper on it. She—there were things she made that she tried to make me eat that I hated like milk toast and oyster stew.

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My father cooked some, particularly on weekends. He was really big at the grill like a lot of guys; he cooked a lot of stuff on the grill on the weekends. He—he was—you know, my family has this tradition of Brunswick stew—making that goes back to the 1800s up there in Bartow County, but when I was growing up, my father really didn’t do that. It was my Uncle Earl who was an Air Force Officer down at Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins. He was sort of like the stew master. And after he—he—he was quite obese; he—he died in his early 50s, and when he died my father sort of took up the

mantle and—and learned all of that stuff and—and has since taught me all of that stuff. And—but he had certain things that he liked to make. He—for what—he loved to fry potatoes. **[Laughs]** He would make really good potatoes. He—he loved—he loves and loved to barbecue and—and—and imparted most of that to me. I’m trying to think of what else we had that we really liked.

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You know, we didn’t—I grew up pretty much in the ‘60s, and we usually drank water or iced—tea with our meals. We never had sweetened colas and things and—and soft drinks like that unless it was a special occasion. We were very sparing in the desserts we ate. We—you know, a lot of the reasons I look around and see why so many Americans are overweight now and just the fact that you know you down 500 calories with a Coke without even thinking about it—we didn’t do that. It just wasn’t an option. It was—the only time we had Coke in the house was when mother hosted Bridge Club. **[Laughs]** And then we would each get one little you know six and a half ounce thing.

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AM: The glass bottle?

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JA: The glass bottle, yeah.

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AM: Excellent. And along that same subject, if you could, describe a little bit of the ceremony of some of these meals and not just your daily meal, but I know that you wrote

a really nice piece about Brunswick stew that I read recently and I—I know it was written a while back, but there was that ceremony that you took over from your father in learning how to cook it, but if you can describe maybe some of the ceremony that went along with any of your meals as a—growing up.

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JA: Well, it's funny. A lot of—a lot of the sort of ritual of our food has actually happened after I've been an adult. It's after—I mean like the whole thing with the Brunswick stew and my father, we never really did that until I was already out of the house. When we were growing up, we would go to other places, and we would experience that. We would go to a pig—pickin' down where my mother is from where they would cook a whole pig. It's not far from the South Carolina line there, and I think there's a lot of sort of spillover Carolina way that they do things down there. Or, we would go to a barbecue up where my father was from near Cartersville and we would do that but we really weren't the people who were doing the cooking until—until we were adults.

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When we were growing up our rituals had more to do with family—I mean, it was holidays. It was, you know, typical Thanksgiving and Christmas meals. I remember we always made a big deal whenever we would get a snow, and it seemed to happen more often when I was little. We'd usually get a good snow every winter. Now, you know, you might get one every three winters. But we would always—I mean we thought about three things; we thought about no school, we thought about let's get—let's get out and slide around on a hill, and then let's go—back out back to the picnic table where we'll find

some really nice drifts of snow and come in and—and make snow cream with mother. And mother from the—that side of the family, I think, is where the sweet tooth really comes from.

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She—everybody down where she's from in Washington County has always gotten into cake—baking. I had an aunt down there, Aunt Joanne, who is, like, the best cake—baker in Washington County, and you couldn't go down there without her having done some swirly thing. And—and my mother was very much along those lines, and so she—she would bake and she would make cookies, and she loved to make candy at Christmas. And we—so they were always connected with special times; we just didn't have them in the house all the time like I get the feeling a lot of people do now.

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AM: Can I back up just for a second and ask you to describe how you make snow cream?

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JA: Well, snow cream is—the way we made it is you would go out and get—I don't remember the exact proportions but you would go out and you would get several bowls, the big plastic bowls full of the most pristine snow you could find; usually the stuff that had drifted up on our wooden picnic table in the back would be good. And then you would come in—well you would get—you would get a chocolate sauce to go with it. What you would do is you would make—you would make a chocolate sauce with Hershey's cocoa, you know, and lots of sugar and a little vanilla and basically—and then

you would wait to the last second to bring the snow in because that stuff would—would melt it. And you let that stuff get you know cooled off a little bit, and then you'd basically whip it up real fast.

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Now there are snow creams, some snow creams I have since seen that are more like a chocolate granita where they do that but they put in a little bit of sort of coarse textured ice. And that would probably be really good. But the snow cream I remember was basically—you know we didn't even divide it up. We basically all got spoons and just attacked the bowl. *[Laughs]*

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AM: That's great. Okay—.

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JA: And my father—and my brother would—my older brother would usually tell me some story about how well you know they've been doing nuclear testing in China or—or in the Soviet Union or something—out in the Pacific, and this snow probably is radioactive. You know, it was kind of like the winter version of the watermelon seed story in the summer. *[Laughs]*

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AM: That's great. When did you first cultivate an interest in food, and what or who was the catalyst?

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JA: Well, I've always been interested in—in—in food. But the first time it actually became something that I was interested in writing about, probably was—I had done a few—I mean I started with AJC in 1980, and I had done a few stories over the years that were tangentially about food. I mean, I remember writing a piece one year at Thanksgiving where I sort of like tracked how your turkey gets to the table and went to a slaughtering plant over in Newberry, South Carolina and actually really enjoyed it, because I've enjoyed process.

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I—and I remember doing some other stories. I remember doing a story one time about the—you know efforts to come up with commercial catfish farming in the South and went to a catfish pond over in Alabama and all that. But those are basically features that had as much to do with the—just the people involved as the—as anything deeper about the food. I think the time when it actually became to be something that I wanted to write about and look about on a—on a deeper level was—was really when—was probably when we hired a new food editor at the paper, Susan Puckett. She came to the paper in 1990, and she lived in some apartments that was initially down the street from us. So I would give her a ride home lots of times, and she's just a very—I mean, she's one of my best friends now, and she's just a very engaging person. And she would just—she just—she sort of sensed that we were kindred spirits and she just asked me a lot about you know how we ate and how I grew up and blah, blah, blah. And we would share experiences.

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And I remember she—she heard about this reunion that I went to every year up in Stilesboro, Georgia, where the—the Brunswick stew traditions in my family were sort of on display and where we had been doing the stews since the 1800s. And—and—and she just heard me talk at some length about that thing and just what a funny scene it was. And she just absolutely wanted me to write about that. And I did; I wrote—and in fact, I even went to a reunion up in Ohio to the northern branch of our family that my father had sort of rediscovered a few years before. And basically I wrote these two pieces, one about the Southern reunion and one about the Ohio reunion where, you know, you literally had distant cousins up there who worked in the fields harvesting okra in northwestern Ohio and literally didn't—I mean, they knew that Campbell's put it in cans for something and that Southerners did something with it but they didn't know anything about it. So I remember my father said one of them asked him, said, "Charles; that—that okra stuff I'm out there on the tractor with every day, what—what do y'all do with that?" He didn't say y'all; "What do you do with that?" **[Laughs]**

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And I think when I wrote those stories about those reunions for Susan and the food section in 1990 it was probably the first time I had ever written stories that actually had recipes attached to them. And I remember the first time that I was on the phone talking to relatives and friends, getting these recipes and making sure they were right and getting them tested, that I felt faintly embarrassed by it. I felt—I—I—I had this sort of attitude that I was a macho male reporter, and I should be writing about government corruption and the idea that I'm talking to Peggy Auchmutey about her puppy chow recipe was somehow demeaning. **[Laughs]** But I got over that.

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AM: That's good. How did you get your first job working, writing, and dealing with food? I think you might have just answered that but—.

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JA: Well, I mean, I was—my—my first job out of school was as an editor with the *Presbyterian Church's Magazine*, and I had done a lot of freelance writing while I was in school for the old *Sunday Magazine* over at AJC and the *Atlanta Magazine* and other publications. So I—so I knew I wanted to be in journalism. And I—I did the job over there for a couple of years at the *Presbyterian* and then there was an editing opening up in—an editor's job opening up in the Features Department at the *Constitution* in 1980 and the guy who was running the department then was somebody that I used to write for in the *Sunday Magazine*. And so I ended up getting hired as an Editor over here and pretty quickly translated—was over to switch over into what I really wanted to do, which was write.

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And—and I always did Features GA and—and—but it took you know I was some years into my career doing that before this became one of the areas that, you know, was a prime interest of mine and one that I, you know, won some recognition for.

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AM: That's great. How have you seen southern food evolve over the course of your lifetime?

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JA: Well, over the course of my lifetime it—it is—I mean the biggest change is that it is something that is now taken seriously and, you know, has garnered some respect. You know, when I started my job in 1980, I would imagine that the general attitude of Southern food, to the extent there was an attitude, was it was just this gloppy, fried, salty, sweet stuff that those people down there ate. There certainly have been some cookbooks that have come along that have celebrated it even then but nothing like the outpouring that's happened in the last 10 years. And so I would say that it's taking its rightful place as a great world and great American cuisine and as you know one of the foremost expressions of the South along with our literature and music.

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AM: Hopefully. Much talk about Southern food is talk of continuity of tradition. In this age is such talk merely romantic or is it accurate?

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JA: I'm sorry. Talk about—much of it's about continuity?

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AM: And tradition.

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JA: Tradition—well, I mean, the answer to that is yes and no. Obviously the—the—the fact that this—this cuisine and all its different variations has gotten serious attention

and—and—and a degree of respect that wouldn't have happened if you didn't have motivated people like John Egerton and John T. and, to some extent, me and all the other people that write about this and work in this—if they didn't feel that that continuity and tradition, but I think what the question might be getting at is the fact that for a large number of the people who live in the South now or expatriate southerners living elsewhere that this has become in some ways sort of ritual food. It's something that you tried out on special occasions, but maybe it doesn't inform my eating choices of life every day.

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You know, I've eaten a fair amount of traditional Southern food in the last few months because we've got the holidays, but to tell you the truth I probably won't eat very much for—for a while now because we—we don't have special holidays, and I'm probably you know from—from now until I go to a barbecue sometime in—in the summer, I'm probably going to eat more Thai food than I am anything that anybody would call Southern.

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And—and the only reason I mention that is I think it's probably typical of the way, you know—it's all become homogenized and—and—and I think a lot of the people who call themselves Southerners who live in the South now are—probably don't have an abiding attachment to this food except when they think about it and choose to have it and choose to exercise their tradition and their—and their roots.

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I think for me the tipping point was when I was in Athens one time and I saw that they were selling bagels at Krispy Kreme. I thought to myself, well, you know, I'm glad I

can get a good bagel in Atlanta now, and I'm glad we can get good fried chicken in New York but there's—but, you know, it's confusing. **[Laughs]**

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AM: Maybe if they deep—fried the bagels and had a glaze on them. Please describe a meal that you would characterize as too cynically southern.

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JA: There's so many of them. The story, the—the dishes that I think of as being most iconically southern, I think, despite what John T. said in his *Fried Chicken* book, fried chicken is definitely near the top of the list. His point was a lot of other people make fried chicken and have their own variations and feel very passionate about it, but it still feels to me very much like a sort of classic identity dish here.

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All I know is that when the 1996 Olympics were in town, and the BBC was thrashing about for its feature stories to do, I found myself at Thelma's one day with a reporter from the BBC eating fried chicken and commenting on it because they thought it was the most quintessentially Southern food. Our style of barbecue, particularly pork barbecue, is certainly a totemic food. And but I think—I remember one time I did a story where I drove the length of the Alaska Highway on its fiftieth anniversary to write about the highway and to write about the—all the soldiers who built it during World War II. And many of them were all black graduates from the Deep South, so it was kind of an interesting cultural clash. But at any rate, I was on the road for about two weeks and along the Alaska Highway there just aren't many fresh things. You know you're basically

eating burgers every night and it's burgers and chocolate chip cookies, you know. And I remember when I got back home I just couldn't wait to go to someplace like Thelma's or the Colonnade and just eat some damn vegetables, some southern vegetables, so that's one I'd have—. The breads, you know cornbread—all and all of its—and, I invented a word one time, in all of its *crumblitudiness* form [**Laughs**]—biscuits, hot breads of all sorts, pecan pie.

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We hired a new editor at the AJC here recently—came down from Baltimore and had lunch with her last week, and she said, “I'm just happy to be in a place where pecan pie is there every day.” [**Laughs**]

00:31:20

AM: Oh yeah, that's great. Well, Jim, that's all of the questions. Do you feel like you want to add anything to your personal founder's oral history?

00:31:30

JA: You know, just—just that it—this was—I mean the—the Alliance was something that was an idea that was overdue, and I'm just really—it's just really cool that it's there, you know, and that—and I'm—I'm glad that I could have played a very small part in helping encourage that.

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AM: Thank you so much.

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JA: Okay.

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AM: It's incredible. Thanks.

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[End Jim Auchmutey Interview]