

MICHAEL BRINKLEY
Owner, Brinkley Farms – Creedmoor, NC

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Location: Michael Brinkley's home – Creedmoor. NC
Interviewer: Kate Medley
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Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

[Begin Michael Brinkley Interview]

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Kate Medley: This is Kate Medley interviewing Michael Brinkley at his home in Creedmoor, North Carolina on the 19th of July 2011. I'll get you to start by introducing yourself and telling us who you are and what you do.

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Michael Brinkley: I am Michael Brinkley. I'm a third generation farmer out of Creedmoor, North Carolina. We're vegetable farmers, formerly a tobacco farm. We've been selling at the Carrboro Market for 10, going on 11 years now. And that's our life is farming. I was born and raised here on the farm. My great-granddaddy lived right down the road and my great-great-granddaddy lived right down the road. We've stayed local to the area for the past 150—160 years.

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I'm just drawing blanks. But farming is our life; that's what we've always done. We've farmed tobacco. We've always farmed vegetables on the side. When the tobacco business started going downhill and we really didn't see no future in that we transferred from tobacco to vegetables and it's been a good transition for us. And I never did have a problem raising tobacco but I feel a lot better now raising healthy vegetables and foods for people versus tobacco. I'm not talking bad about the tobacco industry at all 'cause it was good to us for a lot of years. But I'm happy to be doing what we're doing now, for sure.

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KM: Was it your grandfather who started this farm?

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MB: My great-granddaddy they were all American subsistence farmers, so they raised food for their selves to live off of. And my granddaddy got married in 1941 and the farm where we're on now come up for sale about that same time and him and my grandma bought this place and grew it into a pretty large farm for that time in history.

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So they've always farmed, but he kind of broke off on his own in 1941 and built it up into a pretty large tobacco farm, vegetable farm, always had livestock and that type of stuff, so—. What's the question again?

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KM: Back in 1941 when he moved to this farm had he ever grown tobacco before?

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MB: Yes.

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KM: How did—?

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MB: Well the tobacco was up and coming. They raised tobacco—I reckon they started in the 1920s and did the whole—if you study the history of Durham—some of my extended family was

some relatives to some of the Duke(s)—far extended family. And they got into the tobacco production pretty early. And the '40s, the War years they were sending cigarettes to soldiers overseas; tobacco took off and that's the same time my granddaddy got married and he had raised it before but he kind of—it got better and he got into it bigger and bigger.

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And that paid the bills for a lot of years. I mean he hit it in a growing time, in a booming time, and he grew with the business.

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KM: Do you know more about his tobacco business, who he was selling to and—?

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MB: Well he sold on the Durham Tobacco Market, one of the biggest tobacco markets in the world at the time, and that's where all our tobacco was sold, at auction at some of the old warehouses in Durham, some of which they've torn down most of them.

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In fact, my daddy likes to talk about—they sell at the Durham Market and it's actually right across the road from the old [Inaudible] Warehouse they used to sell at. It's now a parking lot for the Durham Farmers Market or Durham Central Park. So daddy like he'd say, he said I started out over here and I'm going to end up over here, so you know he's making a living—that's where he's made his living was in Durham somehow or another. But that's where the tobacco market was at the time. That's where my granddaddy come up and later years it went elsewhere. When Durham kind of kicked tobacco out and we went down East selling tobacco and places like that but early on that's where all of it was sold was in Durham.

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KM: Do you have a sense of what that was like, the process of taking your tobacco to market? Did he ever tell you much about that?

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MB: Yeah; and I mean I caught the later end of it which was kind of the same style but just one in Durham, but they would harvest tobacco. Early on they would harvest tobacco this time of the year from July, August, September—they would harvest the tobacco. And back then once they got done harvesting they'd put it in a pack house and put it up. And then once they got done harvesting they'd start taking tobacco out of the pack house, grading it into separate grades, and they made these picture perfect beautiful bundles they loaded on trucks, carried it to Durham, unloaded it in the warehouse floor and then—. That's one thing I kind of hate my kids won't ever get to see the auctioneers. You'd have lines of buyers and auctioneers and then the farmers following behind walking through the warehouse and it was just a—the auctioneer was almost singing his auction buying tobacco. And you had all the buyers hollering and it was almost like a circus event—well affair. I mean it was you know a lot of people there, everybody having a good time, especially if prices were good.

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And it was just a happy time for everybody. Everybody in Durham, all the businesses geared up for tobacco selling time because they—it was money. Car dealerships put on sales; clothes—the farmers would bring their wives and kids to town to buy clothes because they had money to buy clothes. And it was just a festive event.

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And in the later years it wasn't quite as festive. Back then I mean farmers would dress up in three-piece suits to go to town to sell their tobacco. When I come along we would clean up but not necessarily put on our Sunday best to go, but it was still just hearing the auctioneer chanting and it—I mean it's something that gets in your blood and you get used to hearing it and I kind of hate my kids won't will be able to hear that but they will learn about it for sure.

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KM: Did you accompany your father and grandfather when they would go to auction?

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MB: I did. From my earliest memories—daddy tells me stories about being over there in some of the first car seats they ever had—when I was little. They didn't have car seats and he's telling me about some of the people trying to figure out what the contraption was in the truck. So I've been going to the warehouse before I could walk and up 'til we got out of the tobacco business in 2001 or 2002. So my life was spent in the tobacco business one way or the other.

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KM: Growing up here in Creedmoor on this farm, what are some of your early memories of being out in the fields?

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MB: I've always been outside in the fields. I rode with daddy in the truck in the car seat riding around the fields looking at crops, the same way my kids have done. By the time I was five years-old he had me driving trucks around the fields just you know getting an early start. When I

was six, seven years-old I would drive tractors through the field when we was priming tobacco. My job was—the kids, I couldn't do much else, but I could sit on the tractor and drive the tractor for everybody else to harvest the tobacco and put it in the trailers behind. And it was a simple job; I was sitting on the tractor and everybody could watch me to make sure I was okay.

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KM: What was the job; you were priming tobacco?

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MB: Priming tobacco; that's the harvesting of tobacco. You go through the field, a very back-breaking job, bent over. The ground loves bottom priming and everybody talks about it—anybody that knows tobacco they go to talking about ground priming(s). Everybody grabs a bag 'cause you're bent over with your nose to the ground for hours on top of hours pulling off the ripe leaves of tobacco, the yellow leaves and you pull off usually three or four leaves at the time—off each stalk, just stalk after stalk after stalk. You would harvest the tobacco with your hand; wrap your hand around the stalk and harvest three or four leaves, put them under your arm, and then once you got an armload maybe 10, 12, 15 stalks you'd pick that up and walk across the rows of tobacco and drop it in a trailer and go back and do it again. And usually the way we were later on, four or five hours a day was spent doing that.

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We were small to mid-scale; we'd prime a barn of tobacco a day and it—usually four or five hours we'd have a barn harvested, so six people bent over through a field like that for that length of time, but it either made a man out of you or killed you—one or the other. **[Laughs]**

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KM: And aside from tobacco, did your grandfather or father grow any other crops?

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MB: Yes, we always had some cows years ago, always had pigs for the sale. They didn't sell a lot early on but they did what I like to call bootleg sausage. If they had a little extra pig or more than they intended on they'd sell to some neighbors and stuff like that. We've always had some grain crops just 'cause they fit into the crop rotation, some corn for livestock feed, wheat, soybeans because they made a good rotation. So and then we've also always had a big garden. My grandma was an avid gardener. She hardly ever bought tomatoes from a store. All her tomatoes or green beans, all that stuff, corn—was put up. She had two or three deep freezers that was full of vegetables. The only thing she bought was staple items, bread and seasonings and all but she had—all her vegetables she put up.

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And I'm sure they probably sold some produce years ago. I've heard them talk about doing some sweet potatoes a time or two and stuff like that. But some of my earlier years I was still in elementary school when we would plant usually just maybe a big planting of sweet corn. And me and my sisters would harvest it; we was fairly young and that would be our school money. We'd go to Durham; mom would carry us to Durham and we'd sit on the side of the road in the back of a truck selling sweet corn and the money we made we'd split it and go buy our school clothes, shoes, books, and that type of stuff. And at that time I really didn't understand it and it wasn't they couldn't afford to buy stuff but they was just teaching us a lesson, a very valuable lesson on we had to work for \$1.00.

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And then it kind of—we done sweet corn, we done some peas and butter beans and stuff like that and it kind of fell off. Tobacco took up all of our time. And then I reckon in the late '90s when my sister started college, just to kind of help her through school, we got back in the vegetable production and kind of picked tobacco up a little bit. And that's when tobacco was kind of headed down and we didn't see much future there and we seen a lot of future in buying the local thing was coming on and it just kind of blew out of anything we could have ever imagined.

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When we got back into pretty big time with corn, the staple Southern items—corn, peas, butter beans, greens, and sweet potatoes and we've grew into—we still do all those crops on a larger scale than we ever imagined and have also thrown in a lot of crops that I didn't even know what they were two or three years ago.

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KM: Like what?

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MB: I thought the only lettuce it was was iceberg lettuce and now we plant 12—15 different kinds of lettuce. I thought turnip greens and mustard greens was the only greens it was and now we plant kale. I think I got four or five kinds of kale(s) and we plant carrots now that I knew what they were but never would have thought of planting any. Probably the oddest thing we plant is kohlrabi. A lot of people—I just do that for the uniqueness; it gets a lot of people that talk about it. But tomatoes we do; I think I've got 16 different varieties of tomatoes this year and

used to if it wasn't just a red slicing tomato it wasn't a tomato. We've definitely expanded on what we've started on.

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KM: What was that decision like? Think back to when your family was mulling over the decision to switch from tobacco into vegetable crops.

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MB: For me it was kind of a no-brainer. I graduated high school in '95 and the tobacco business was real good. I got married in 1998 and the tobacco business was still pretty good but it was a lot of questions up in the air, a lot of politics, a lot of bad stuff going on. And one thing after another—we had to invest a lot of money to keep doing what we was doing. The tobacco companies wanted us to change just a bunch of little stuff but it added up to a lot of cost for us and we was making the same money but we spent it a lot more.

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And so my years when I was just married were some of the toughest years we had as tobacco farmers. I really didn't have a lot of love lost for it. My daddy on the other hand, he'd raised tobacco all his life. That's the only thing he knew. So it was easier for me; I decided I'm either going to make it without tobacco or I'm going to find something else to do. So to me it wasn't that much of a decision.

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When the buyout program with the tobacco when that come about we got the new contracts for tobacco and I looked at the prices and I knew there was no way I could make a living for my young family with the prices they were offering, just no way possible. And I told

my daddy, I said I'm not raising anymore tobacco. I said you know if we have to do something else we just will. And I'm not going to say—he still misses tobacco and I miss it, but I never really looked back. It was a whole lot easier decision for me than it was him 'cause that's all he had ever done. I mean he had done everything else but that's what paid the bills. That was always the stand-by crop.

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KM: Do you miss something specific about it or just sort of the nostalgia of it?

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MB: I reckon more the nostalgia of it? My wife tells me I'm crazy. If we're riding around and—not that we get out much in the summer, but if I go by a field of freshly topped tobacco when they break the flowers out of the top, I miss topping tobacco. I miss—it weren't easy work but it was more laid back work. Everything had a schedule; you started in the spring, you planted your crop. You moved into cultivating and we were rushed and we had a lot to do. We was always busy but then you moved into topping and then you moved into harvesting and you just kind of went from season to season.

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Whereas what we do now is always rush, let's plant, let's pick, let's—you know we're doing something all year long. And I miss the seasonality of it I reckon but—. And I miss some of the jobs. They just—we had a good time doing it. And we have a good time doing stuff now but it's just—I reckon the nostalgia of it just—. I think back on kind of like I was talking about the warehouse and going there and that's where all the farmers would meet, which is—I enjoy the Farmers Market now 'cause we get to talk with farmers there and everybody has some good

laughs and all. But it's kind of the same way at the warehouses; all the farmers, that's when they would come together. They'd get to tell all their hardship stories about how bad they had it during the year and nobody—no farmer ever has it good. That's always you know the end of the world. And like I say, you had the auctioneer there, you know singing and all that in the background and—and that's what I miss about it.

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KM: Did you always know that you wanted to become a farmer?

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MB: I think so. That's all I ever done coming up and out of high school I thought about a lot of different stuff. Truly I went to school to be a mechanic. I mechanic(ed) on the farm all my life and I went to school and learned some more electrical stuff and was pretty much set on getting a job at—I had several jobs lined up. And that was 1996 and then Hurricane Fran come through. It pretty much tore our place all to pieces. And that's about the time I got out of school and I said you know I'm going to stick around and help get everything back together and it bit me. The bug bit me then and that's where I've been ever since. I've never worked nowhere else other than just little odd jobs in the wintertime and stuff like that but I've never done nothing but farm.

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KM: And you were saying that your wife grew up not far from here. Tell us about your family situation.

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MB: My wife, Jennifer, she lived in the Tarr River Community; actually her grandparents are mountain people. They come down from the mountains and—years ago ‘cause it wasn’t any work in the mountains. They come down—they’re in the logging business. And me and her met in middle school, and we were friends and we got to dating pretty seriously in high school and it went from there.

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But her family is I don’t know maybe seven—eight miles the other side of town from us and we keep it all local. But she—I told her she’s the most citified country girl I’ve ever seen in my life. She lived in the country all her life, lived right across from probably one of the largest tobacco farms in the area, but she didn’t know anything about farming. And she got broke in pretty hard the first couple years. She’s got used to the hours now but it—especially the first few years, dry times and all we’d be irrigating or doing stuff and she’d be sleeping when I left home and sleeping when I come home. But she enjoys it now and—well she enjoyed it then but she just—it was a steep learning curve for her.

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And we got three children—I got my oldest daughter, Taylor is 12; my middle one is Madison and she just turned 10; and Hunter, my baby just turned 6. And they love to farm. They’re all—Taylor is more the paperwork and she likes going to the Market. She went this past weekend to the Market and helped me out. Madison will stick with me everywhere I go. She can drive a truck as good as anybody 10 years old. Hunter, he’s my tractor buddy. If the tractor is riding he wants to be on it.

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The other day, we was riding—he was in the back of the truck and I carried a lady down the road a box of tomatoes and she got a kick out of him. He reached over in the box. I took the

top off to show them to her and he reached over in the box and grabbed a tomato and took it out and just took a bite out of it. He eats a tomato like an apple. And it's stuff like that, they enjoy but they really don't realize how much they do enjoy it and how much they've got it made compared to other kids. But he can walk out his back door and go pick tomatoes.

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We love to hunt and fish every chance we get, just depending on what time of year it is and they love the outdoors. They got that bug from me for sure.

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KM: And you said your dad still lives on the farm and works on the farm.

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MB: Yeah it's still me and my father. He was in pretty bad shape last year. But he's out working every day now, pulling me along, you know all day every day. So yeah; he's just as much involved in it as he's ever been.

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KM: How long have you been taking your vegetables to Carrboro?

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MB: I believe this is our eleventh year at the Carrboro Market. We started in Durham I think a year or two before and just kind of trying—Durham was a very new market so they were accepting—I hate to say it like that—but pretty much anybody. And we definitely had a lot to learn the first year of the Market. You know we was used to planting one crop of something and

carrying it and selling it and then we were done. And we had no idea about succession planting and keeping crops coming all year long. And that was a very steep learning curve for us trying to keep something year-round—well season-long.

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And it took us several years to kind of figure out what was going on and what to do but we was probably in our second or third year of good vegetable production when we went to Carrboro. And definitely being in Carrboro you learn from some of the best. That's probably one of the most competitive markets it is as far as the grade of farmers there. It's you're selling against the best when you're selling at Carrboro.

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KM: Durham is a lot closer; why did you go to Carrboro?

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MB: I don't know. I don't know how we ended up in Carrboro, but we knew it was a good Market. I mean just like it is now; you know Carrboro was the place to get into. And it was just known to be a good Market as I reckon, just you know trying to expand and that particular time we pushed forth.

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KM: Before you started taking your vegetables to Market what was your outlet?

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MB: Local people; we had a little roadside stand or put a sign up in front of the house or depending—I mean one time we just pulled the trailer out front and you know put something on it. And somebody would stop by and if they wanted something—it was very bare bones.

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We definitely had to learn a lot about marketing our product, but years ago we just put stuff in our truck and go sit up on the side of the road somewhere, but kind of like the old truck farmer a lot of people call them but we definitely do a lot more in the Market with our product now and try to have nice full stands and keep the quality there and make things look as good as we can.

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KM: Right; when you first started taking your vegetables to Market what were you taking?

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MB: To start with our first year we had definitely corn, probably—maybe a few butter beans and peas in the hull and we were only shelling very few beans then; green beans, and that was about the extent of it—maybe some sweet potatoes. Now I haven't even counted how many varieties of stuff now. We're probably in the 100 to 120 different varieties of stuff now, so—between different types of tomatoes, different types of beans, different types of lettuces, greens; just it's so many different varieties out there now we're doing and always pushing for something new.

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KM: For someone that will never get the chance to visit your farm, tell us what it looks like out here. Take us on a tour.

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MB: Our farm is different than a lot of farms that sell at Carrboro as in we're spread out. Being a tobacco farm and kind of the nature of some of the crops we grow now, the corn we raise and stuff like that, it's hard to do any quantity on a small acreage. So we're spread over about three miles. Some of the land is owned; a lot of it's rented. And we kind of start on one end of the farm and start planting so many acres. We will make a planting of some corn, butter beans, peas, and then we'll plant that farm down and then we'll move to another farm and do the same thing and we do that eight, nine, ten times throughout the year.

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But our livestock is based pretty much on our home farm, so we can look after it, you know and keep everything looked after. But it's a working farm; it's not necessarily a picturesque farm. Although people come out here and say it's beautiful but everything is not always mowed and nice and neat and proper and prim, but it's a working farm. We turn out a lot of good quality produce and if you look across the field it doesn't always look the picturesque magazine type picture you want to see but it's a lot of quality stuff that comes out of our fields.

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KM: You mentioned livestock.

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MB: We raise some pigs and sell at the Farmers Markets and through our CSA and cows. We do some cows. We have done eggs occasionally, some meat chickens, but pork is probably our biggest meat seller.

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We're actually in the process now—we've added on some fencing and hopefully this fall we can build up our cows. We had some small pens but they were in bad repair, so we're adding on. And right now we don't have any cows but we're going to start adding them back on hopefully this fall and get that built back up and kind of taking that a new direction.

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KM: Tell us about your CSA.

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MB: We have about a 500-member CSA Program. The come about—that was actually a lady that come out and talked to my father, I believe it was. They started it, RTI—which is a—it's a business in Research Triangle Park that showed some interest. They wanted to get some local produce for their employees. And they teamed up with State and we had never heard of a CSA Program. And that was just beyond our belief that people would pay money upfront for something they didn't have or you hadn't produced and we just couldn't comprehend that in any which way, shape, form, or fashion.

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KM: When was this?

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MB: This was in 2001 I believe. And we started out; that first year I think they had nine or ten members. And it kind of grew on us and grew on the customers. The customers definitely liked it. And we picked it on up. Actually my mother and father were kind of looking after that. I was still raising tobacco and some other stuff and we were in it together but we each had kind of our specialty we looked after. And I think it was in 2003 or 2004, me and my wife kind of—Duke Hospital wanted to do the same thing. They wanted to have a fresh produce program for their folks and we started [a CSA] over there and I think we ended up—we started out with 15 or 20 and they might have been up to 15 or 20—maybe 30 at RTI, so we was doubling it and thought we was doing big. And it just kind of blossomed from there. It just—we were growing the—more quantity of produce and we seen the demand there and we increased. We drop off Tuesdays. We're in Durham, we're in North Raleigh and we drop off in Carrboro in the Research Triangle part. And that's definitely been a—that's helped pay the bills too—definitely. That's been a good thing for us.

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KM: Do you still work with a number of corporations or organizations or is it more individual-based?

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MB: We do. We're still at RTI where we started at. That was our first one; that was kind of the first one. We're still at Duke Hospital and they've been very, very—we're been fortunate to be able to deal with companies like that—that want to get stuff to their customers. It kind of helped us promote what we were doing.

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And then we kind of went out onto our own and we actually have a pickup at the farm for people—well they can live anywhere but you know more local people that want to pick up. And that's easier for us to manage than an on-farm stand 'cause we have a set time, certain days a week—people can come pick up their produce and grab what they want and go. And a few years ago we had some people asking in North Raleigh—asking about our program and we went down there and we've been very fortunate there. We're doing that one on our own. So we still deal with some corporations and we do some on our own, too. It just kind of depends on where we're at.

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KM: When I first met you this past Saturday at the Carrboro Farmers Market it was tomato day. Give us a sense of what varieties of tomatoes you had that day and give us a sense of what you brought to Market.

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MB: Tomatoes we had for tomato day, we started—we had just a basic what I call a commercial slicing tomato. That's the simplest we had. Then we had like some Butter Boy red tomatoes and then we get into our heirlooms. We had some Roma tomatoes, good salsa tomatoes and Yellow Roma(s) which have been a pretty big hit this year. It just adds some color. Probably one of our bigger sellers was the Pineapple tomato. It's a good sweet, mild-flavored tomato; Green Zebra(s), Cherokee Purple(s), which that's kind of a standard at the Carrboro Market, Cherokee Green(s) which is kind of a new one that's coming out; Rose tomatoes, kind of like the flower, a rose, is a real full-flavored tomato. That's been a big hit for us this year. And then we have our

Cherry tomatoes, our Sun Sugars and Red Cherries and that pretty much covered it for our tomatoes on tomato day.

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And then we had a lot of peppers Saturday—Bell peppers, Colored Bell peppers, Colored—we have a neat little Snack pepper, a little small Snack Pepper that a lot of people like—the kids like that they can eat, very few seeds in them, very sweet; lots of corn, shell beans, shell peas, field peas. We still had some onions we harvested back in the spring that's keeping — storage onions, a lot of melons—cantaloupes, watermelons. We have three varieties of watermelons. Even have a yellow watermelon, which kind of made my daddy scratch his head a little bit. He said there wasn't no such thing as—he said watermelon is supposed to be red. We have three or four varieties of cantaloupes, orange flesh cantaloupes that a lot of people seem to like real well.

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And but tomatoes and corn and shell beans, that's probably what we're more known for at the Carrboro Market. That's probably some of our bigger sellers. We got a long ways to go to compete with some of the more standard tomato growers, people that is known for tomatoes at the Market. It's kind of cool to see the different colors and stuff that we got there now though.

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KM: I'm really struck by how much your farm has changed in your dad's lifetime. Are there a lot of things that he sort of shakes his head at in wonderment?

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MB: I used to gauge if I wanted to plant a new product, if daddy shook his head and said what in the hell is this—then it was going to do pretty good. That’s kind of the way it was; if he said this will never work then I knew I had a hit.

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But and he doesn’t say that much anymore. He just kind of goes along with it and is—both of us are beating our heads to books trying to come up with new stuff to do ‘cause you always got to try to find something, you always find something a little different to kind of keep yourself growing and looking. But yeah; it’s definitely changed a lot. You know we used to just be the staple, purple whole peas, corn type folks, and we’ve added new peas. One of our bigger sellers now are cream peas. We didn’t even know what a cream pea was. We found them by accident. We were looking—people had been asking us for a pea and we couldn’t find them, couldn’t find them by name, and a guy said well I got these here. Let’s try these and see how they work for you. And that’s turned into one of our—we’re known for our cream peas and one of the best flavored peas we’ve ever had. That’s kind of the way our farm works. We’ve learned a lot of stuff by accident and the School of Hard Knocks.

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KM: As I understand it, you take your product to Carrboro and your dad takes it to Durham?

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MB: That’s right.

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KM: Tell us about that arrangement.

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MB: Well that's kind of the way we keep it split up. It's pretty much a half and half; it makes it pretty simple 'cause usually we harvest through the week and when we get everything set up to go to Market we split it right down the middle. We send half to Durham and half to Carrboro. And it's kind of an easy way for us to keep the farm split up and keep it where everybody—it makes it simple for us to keep everything split up that way.

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KM: Who does better? **[Laughs]**

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MB: That's a pretty stiff competition but it's not a lot of difference. We try to come out on top a lot of times and most times—a lot of times we do but it's a stiff competition for sure.

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KM: Tell us about your Market schedule. Like what happens on Friday to get ready for Market and then lead us through Saturday.

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MB: It's pretty much a week-long job getting ready for Market. We harvest—like corn and that type stuff, we harvest it the day before to keep it as fresh as possible. But we try to harvest everything at the peak of ripeness where it'll still keep. And but Fridays are rush days. We get up Friday morning and we try to harvest corn first thing in the morning while it's still cool out. And

then we go to melons and once it dries off we'll try to get tomatoes picked. And we are all busy shelling peas and usually we start on Friday mornings; it's not uncommon to start 5:30—6 o'clock in the morning and start way earlier than that some days, on the real hot days.

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And usually we're still loading trucks and getting stuff ready to go at 8, 9, 10 o'clock at night—have been later than that. And then a normal Saturday morning we usually—everybody is at the farm at 3 o'clock to get trucks—to get everything else loaded—stuff that has to stay in the coolers overnight we load up. And like this time of year when we have a lot of variety, a lot of stuff to get set up we like to be sitting at Carrboro 4:30—quarter to five in the morning. And that gives us plenty of time to get our stand set up and get it as presentable as we want it to be. It gives us time to get everything organized and looking like we want it to without being rushed.

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A lot of people tell us we're crazy to get there that early but I don't like being rushed. I like to have time to kind of get everything laid out and somewhat enjoy the morning before the rush hits.

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KM: Who helps both here on the farm and at Market?

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MB: We've got some high school—well I say high school kids; I've got some of them, they started with me when they was a junior in high school and now they're getting ready to graduate college. But I started out with two guys, Justin and Jimmy and found them through the FFA at the local high school. And then after this there have been brothers, family, friends of them, and

they make up—most of them are our Market help. They pick stuff; they do the whole nine yards. And it just depends on what time of the year it is and depends on how many is out here working.

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We have several H2A guys which is—they come in from Mexico on the H2A Work Program and they're here seasonally usually from—I'd say mid-April through—most time they like to be home—we always say Halloween. They like to be home before the last week of October and we do our best to accommodate them. They can stay longer but we try to keep them as happy 'cause if they're happy they do better. So we try to accommodate their schedules best we can but they stay here and then some of those guys have been with us—I think they've been with us 12—14 years now. So they come back every year and they do the most picking by far.

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We have some contests several times a year. Everybody gets out there and see who can compete and I don't have anybody that can come close to them. But everybody gets a kick out of that. But that's—and it just depends on what time of the year it is and it depends on how many people we've got working here. In the peak of the summertime this time of year we can have upwards of 14—15 people working and then in the wintertime it's me and my wife, daddy and mama and our kids and then I have a few afterschool guys come in and just do a little work in the afternoon. So it's very dependent on the time of year is how many people is working.

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KM: As far as Markets go what do you think the Carrboro Market does particularly well?

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MB: They do everything well. It's just such a well-run organization. Sarah [Blacklin] is probably the best Market Manager in the world—well in the United States. I mean she's on top of all the—what's coming out, what do we need to do to keep customers happy, to keep customers coming back, and I don't know what they do particularly better than—they just do every—they micro-manage everything and try to keep the farmers wanting to do better and wanting to improve their sales and keep the customers coming and keep the customers happy. And that and it's just a top group of farmers there, too.

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I feel like if I can make myself look even close to what some of the other farmers there are doing then I'm on top of the world 'cause it's some very, very good people there.

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KM: Who is there at the Market that you particularly admire?

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MB: Some of the ones that's been there so long—Alex and Betsy come to mind, Ken Dawson comes to mind, and I'm not just limiting it to them but they've been there so long and they do such an excellent job, always beautiful stands, top quality. And then they do such a good job they're good mentors to other local farmers, you know getting people started and I really admire that in them.

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KM: What would you say are the challenges—from a farmer's perspective—of selling your goods at a Farmers Market rather than wholesale?

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MB: I don't know. I see more challenges in the wholesale side. It's challenging; you've got to have a customer base. You've got to keep top quality and have a good selection to keep people coming to shop with you. And that's definitely a challenge especially in our summertime. You never know how the weather is going to treat you. And I feel like the more variety we can offer people and the better quality we can offer people the happier the customers will be which turns into good for us. And that's always a challenge is trying to keep the customer happy.

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And the challenge of trying to raise so many different types of crops at one time; most of your wholesale farmers they raise a huge amount of one crop which is a lot of work but it's less management to manage one type of crop. We've got so many different—everything we've got needs different amounts of water, different amounts of nutrients, nothing is the same and we have to micro-manage every little bitty crop. And they can get real interesting sometimes especially when it's getting hot and dry like it is now.

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KM: I imagine you get a lot of questions at the Carrboro Market about how you grow your crops. What do you tell people about like sustainability sorts of issues?

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MB: We get a lot of questions and a lot of people assume that the Carrboro Market is an all-organic Market and we're one of the few growers—we're not organic. And I'm upfront with people about that; I don't want anybody to think that we are organic.

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We have—and I say this and I’m kind of scared to say it like this but we’re definitely not organic but we’re starting to blend in some organic principles. We’re doing more with covered crops now, cutting back on some of the extra nutrients. We’re still adding fertilizers and using fertilizers but we’re using some cover crops to cut back on the amount of nitrogen we’re having to add. We pay more attention to our pest control; we don’t go out and spray a crop just to be spraying a crop. We target the specific problems—disease and pest-wise.

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So but we’re not organic. We do use—and my best analogy on that as I tell a lot of people is—it’s like taking medicine. We don’t just go take medicine for anything but if we use a specific medicine for a specific problem and follow directions and don’t use it on a regular basis then everything gets better. If you go out there and take the whole bottle at one time then you’ve had a bad day. So but—and I don’t try to sway anybody’s mind you know from one way or the other. You know if they’re looking organic then you know I try to send them to somebody that can sell them exactly what they’re looking for.

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KM: Aside from that what other sorts of questions do you get again and again from customers in Carrboro?

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MB: Everybody wants to know when—you know when was this picked or you know what varieties of this, how is this different, you know this variety different from that variety? One of my—everybody that helps us favorite question on Saturday morning is—was this corn picked

this morning? Yes, ma'am; we got up at 12 o'clock last night and picked this corn for you.

[laughs] But we try to keep everything as fresh as possible—but you know it's not possible but I've had so many questions I can't really think of no good ones. We get some oddball questions; I mean a lot of legitimate questions and then we get a lot of questions that you just kind of shake your head at too.

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KM: And who are your customers?

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MB: Our customers range; it's no one group. We've got college professors, college students, and everybody in between, your blue-collar workers, white-collar workers; I've seen some top State officials. I mean you're dealing with people that I never thought I'd be dealing with and then people more like what I consider myself just more kind of laid back, blue-collar type people. And we deal with a little bit of everybody.

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KM: Is there any one person that comes to mind as a regular that comes every week to your stand?

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MB: It's a bunch of them. The first one that pops in my head is Miss Carla. She's a lady; she's always there bright and early, first thing every Saturday morning, and sweet lady. She loves watermelon season. That's her favorite time of the year.

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But we have a lot of—especially early in the morning a lot of our regular customers and I'm sad to say a lot of them I don't even know by name but we know each other and carry on a conversation. One couple that sticks in my mind—and it sticks in mind 'cause we just lost—his wife just passed away but they was there bright and early every Saturday morning and really enjoyed talking to people and was real enjoyable to talk to. And he still comes by and visits from time to time, but—Bill and Nancy. A lot of people know them; they were definitely regulars there. But it's a lot of good friendships evolved there from our regular customers, people you get to learn about their lives and they know what's going on in your life.

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KM: What's your favorite thing about going to Market on Saturdays?

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MB: Nothing beats—I reckon the best part is coming home and looking at the money and hoping you made some money but the best part is getting there early, getting everything set up and then right before the rush of customers hit you might have a few customers, you turn around and look and you just got—everything looks good. You know everybody's stand at the Market is big and full and everything is stacked beautifully. Everybody has got everything looking good and it's hard to beat that feeling when you just turn around and look and not just my stand—everybody's stand—everybody is talking and everybody is getting ready for the day, that's probably my favorite thing about the Market.

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KM: And your dad, are there things that stick out, rules of thumb that he taught you about farming?

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MB: Yeah; and it's hard to put it into words. It's more just a—I really can't think of anything off the top of my head, but—to pay attention to details. He probably is as good—I'd put him up with anybody farming—tobacco, any crop that is ever raised. Pay attention to details and just more taught by learning. It's something you can't learn from a book. You can gain a lot of information from books but it's something you got to do and learn. And it's so many mistakes that I would have made that I've learned from you know—that he's kind of steered me away from without having to learn on my own. And he's always paid attention to detail and he knows—. It's like he always knew kind of what to do and when to do it before it needed doing and that's something I try to take away—trying to do stuff before it needs doing to stay ahead of the ball on it.

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KM: And what's on the horizon for your farm? What might you try new next year or next month or five years from now?

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MB: I think we've tried about everything new we can think of without going into some berry production and that type of stuff and it's plenty of berries there and I'm really not looking for that any time soon. We decided last year that I think our main goal from here on out is to kind of do a better job of what we're already doing but that's one of my goals over the next several years

is to maybe not try so much new as just do a better job of what we've got with what we've got and try to do more—more with less maybe.

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KM: And what other things do you want to tell us about either about your farm or your family or your history with the Carrboro Farmers Market?

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MB: I don't know; it's a great way of life. We take it for granted a lot of times. People will ride out to the farm and—man, it's beautiful out here. And we just—we see it every day and we just take it for granted especially when it's hot and dry and we need a rain or if it's wet and we need it to dry out so we can get something done. But it's a way of life that I couldn't see doing anything else and I hope my kids have the option to do whatever they want to do but I hope they keep these memories—. You know I think they even realize now what they've got and how they've got it made compared to a lot of—. They might not get to go to a ballgame every day or do this and that every day but they've kind of got it made out here on the farm.

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KM: Well thanks for sharing your stories with us.

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MB: You're welcome.

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[End Michael Brinkley Interview]