

ANDRÉ PRINCE JEFFRIES
Prince's Hot Chicken Shack – Nashville, TN

Date: July 7, 2006
Location: Prince's Fried Chicken Shack - Nashville, TN
Interviewers: Joe York
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 33 minutes
Project: Nashville Eats

This transcription derives from a filmed interview.

[Begin Andre Jeffries]

00:00:00

Andre Jeffries: Okay. Andre Prince Jeffries—I'm here at Prince Hot Chicken Shack, located at 123 Ewing Drive right off Dickerson Road in Nashville, Tennessee.

00:00:14

Joe York: What is it—what do you all do there?

00:00:17

AJ: Well we cook chicken—all day long, all day long for Monday through—no, we're closed on Sunday and Monday. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday we're open from 12 Noon to 10 pm; we used to stay open 'til Midnight but that got so tiresome being right back by 10 in the morning so we—we stopped and we're open 'til 10. However we don't really get out of here 'til about 11:30 Tuesday through Thursday; on Friday and Saturday we're open from 12 Noon 'til 4:00 a.m. We're known for late-night. Now when my uncle had it he always opened about 5:00 in the evenings and the afternoons and stayed open 'til after Midnight during the week. It's known as a late-night place. But when I took over and quit Metro that's when I started opening at lunchtime. But it's usually always been opened in the evenings.

00:01:26

JY: Tell me about the—the chicken; I mean why—why do you cook—I've never heard of hot

chicken before, so explain to me first off what is hot chicken, where does it come from, and what is it—like literally what is—like just—just tell me what hot chicken is.

00:01:41

AJ: Well the story is it was—there were already—they were already in business when I was—I was born. **[Laughs]** So I grew up on this chicken; I didn't grow up in the establishment. It belonged to my great-uncle and I never knew that I would even be in this type of business. However, the story goes—is my uncle was a womanizer, and he was out late one night, and by revenge his lady friend the next morning cooked some chicken and to get him back she poured all this pepper on it, to get him back. But he liked it; so he told his friends about it and the word got around, so he asked her to keep cooking some more. So that's—that's the story; so but it was for punishment but it was something that turned into our business. **[Laughs]** So that—I—I—that's just the story; I don't know really how it got started and I really didn't know it was that peculiar to just Nashville you know; I thought everybody had it. I had no idea. But it was—as far as I can remember—my father always got it. He—he went down late on Saturday nights and when we woke up on Sunday morning it was always on the stove, so I'm used to it being on the stove for a minute before you know—I didn't eat it right out of the skillet; it always set a while and that's the way I like it now, **[Laughs]** like a day and then I eat it overnight—and then I eat, then I'll know whether it's right or not because that's the way I'm used to it being. But that's how it got started, so it went from there. But it was supposed to have been a form of punishment. **[Laughs]** **[Phone Rings]** That's the way it's supposed to have been.

00:03:50

JY: I think a lot of people would probably still think that though, right—I mean as hot as it is some of it, you know but I mean people really—

00:03:56

AJ: That's—

00:03:57

JY: —really like it hot don't they? So why—why do you think—

00:04:01

AJ: It's more women eat it hot than men.

00:04:02

JY: Can you start over with that?

00:04:04

AJ: More women eat it hot than men and I don't know why that it is, but they do. So maybe that's something the scientists can look into—how women can tolerate that heat more so than men. Men will start out but they will quickly fade to—and back down to medium. Not that many men get it hot; I think I have just one customer now that—that's been getting it hot for a long time—even extra hot and now he's—he's mostly medium now. So he's about the longest one that

has maintained hot, but those women—I don't know what it is. **[Laughs]** I guess it keeps up with their anger. Oh me—but that's something they can look into—the scientists.

00:04:59

JY: Talk to me about—we had the Mayor in here today. Talk—tell me about your relationship with him and that—.

00:05:04

AJ: Oh it's beautiful; he's always—his theme has always been the neighborhood Mayor.

However, he's been coming in for as long as I've been in business for 20-some odd years, so that was long before he became Mayor.

00:05:21

JY: I'm sorry; hold on. Okay; can you—I'm sorry—sorry about that. So his theme was—can you start back over with that?

00:05:29

AJ: The neighborhood Mayor, Mayor Bill Purcell is the neighborhood Mayor; that's what he campaigned on and truly he is. He—he definitely associates himself with small business—the mom and pop business and he—he's just great. We just love him to death. He comes in at least once a week—sometimes twice, but sometimes he carries on his little conferences here.

[Laughs] Oh baby, we love him to death and every now and then he'll come and answer the phone. If the phone

is ringing he'll answer it, so I mean he's just a familiar face around here and we love him to death.

00:06:09

JY: But does he—he eats the chicken?

00:06:12

AJ: He eats it hot. He has always eaten it hot—that's—he's got an iron stomach. **[Laughs]** He's always gotten it hot—never medium a mile. So he's a great fellow.

00:06:27

JY: Go ahead and tell us the recipe real fast if you don't mind.

00:06:30

AJ: Well I can't do that because I still have bills; they still come every day. **[Laughs]** Have mercy, I can't do that, but I don't know. It's something—they say it's addictive; they say it's addictive and I have some people who come every day that I'm open. They come every day. I don't know how they do it but they are chicken-holics; they are truly some chicken-holics in Nashville. Yeah; I don't know why it's—it's nothing that I've done though because I didn't start it.

[Laughs]

00:07:06

JY: You're just a pusher.

00:07:07

AJ: I thank God—but that’s right; that’s exactly what you could call me. **[Laughs]** A pusher— have mercy; it has definitely helped me. But there is—there definitely are some chicken-holics, there are.

00:07:21

JY: Tell me about the youngest people you’ve ever seen it and the oldest person.

00:07:24

AJ: I think the youngest person that—that eats this chicken is a little boy and his mother brings him in; he’s about two. He has to have it hot. He doesn’t eat it—I mean I give it to him mild. But I think a lot of pregnant women eat this chicken. They say they crave it and I think that’s why he has to have heat, and he’ll cry—his mother says he just cries if he doesn’t get it. He’s two; that’s the youngest customer I have. Now it goes on from there. One man said it took the hair off his chest and another one says it put hair on his chest. So I didn’t want to see that chest. **[Laughs]** You hear all kinds of stories. **[Laughs]**

00:08:16

JY: Do—do people claim that it’s like an aphrodisiac at all, like do they claim that it helps their sex drive or anything like that?

00:08:24

AJ: Oh well I really didn’t want to go into that but we do have a regular customer that is—we

think she's a lady of the evening. She's been coming for as long as I've been in business and she gets it hot; she brings her suitors down here—different suitors. She comes always on the weekend and she gets it hot and one night she just couldn't wait to get out. So the finale was on the hood of a car, parked in front of the Chicken Shack, but it was so—it was good that it was late. We've had a couple of people like that; she's not the only one. We can see feet flying—this particular person had it on the hood of a car, but we've seen feet flying, doors not open; we just shut our eyes and continue to do our work [*Laughs*]*—*what we're good at; so different things turn different people on. [*Laughs*]

00:09:40

JY: Some like it hot.

00:09:44

AJ: They can't get—they can't get out of the parking lot and that's happened several times.

[*Laughs*] But she—she has to have her—I guess that's her appetizer first before she goes into the final act. [*Laughs*] It's interesting; and she's an older lady. She's been coming for years.

[*Laughs*] She'll be here tonight.

00:10:13

JY: Do you have—do you have other—do you have other memorable customers, like people—I mean you know just like—?

00:10:20

AJ: Well we had one lady that came in and did—well we call it the Janet Jackson thing but

Janet just gets accused of doing it. It was really—well I can't think of his name that really pulled it down but she—she did that act here. Oh yes; we—we have a lot of shows and sometimes the women get carried away and they roll on the floor and some of them jump up on the table and they do dances and we have to pull them down off the table and sometimes they do get a little wild. Yes; it's some strange things go on associated with hot chicken. *[Laughs]*

00:11:01

JY: Now tell me do you know that band Yo La Tengo? They've made two songs about your chicken.

00:11:07

AJ: Somebody has told me about it, but I—

00:11:10

JY: There's two songs called *Hot Chicken Number One* and *Hot Chicken Number Two*. Have you ever heard about that?

00:11:12

AJ: Really? They—I've heard about them but I've never heard the song. I haven't heard the song but I have got to get it. As a matter of fact, somebody—one of my customers wrote it down for me but I—I'm not familiar with them but he's told me about it twice.

00:11:30

JY: I've got it back at home; I'll send you a copy.

00:11:34

AJ: Well I'll have to go buy it. I am more than happy to buy but I'd like to hear what they have to say.

00:11:40

JY: Yeah; it's just—it doesn't have anything to do with chicken though. They just call it *Hot Chicken Number One*, but it just doesn't sound—

00:11:45

AJ: Is that right? So they don't mention any hot chicken at all?

00:11:49

JY: No; they just call it *Hot Chicken* and then it's like all this you know—it's this crazy song.

00:11:53

AJ: Well one of my customers that's in the music business—as a matter of fact he lives in—in Europe and he—he's the one—he's in the music business but he's the one that told me about it, Kelly; uh-hm. So I've heard of it.

00:12:08

JY: And do you—but on a—how—how do you feel about the fact that you—you've run this—you've been running this business for a while and I mean how does it make you feel

to watch this place fill up you know every day and how does it make you feel to have—to come in—I mean—?

00:12:24

AJ: I definitely feel good about it but it really—it's just my way of making a living; that's the way I see it and we don't advertise. It's just word of mouth; we haven't advertised in about 18 years since we've been at this location and it's been at several locations throughout the city; it's just moved from, you know, family member to family member and, you know, nobody has really wanted to invest in it. And I think I've been in it the longest—26 years; in August it will be 26 years, so I think it's about time for us to do something now because we really hadn't taken it seriously.

00:13:12

JY: Well tell—and really I don't want to know what's in the recipe. I just asked you that because I wanted to hear you say I really don't want to tell you.

00:13:18

AJ: Uh-hm.

00:13:19

JY: But what I want to know is why—and I mean—oh first I want to know how often does—because this happened to me. I came here last week and I was like, I'm not sure what I should have, and they were like, do you like stuff hot? I was like well, kind of, and they were like, you should have the hot. So like how often do y'all do that? Do y'all play practical jokes on

people?

00:13:37

AJ: Well we try to tell anybody that we're not familiar with—any new faces that the mild—because sometimes it shocks people when they get the mild and they say—they run back up to the counter—this is hot. The mild is still a little hot; as a matter of fact, the mild is hotter than some people's—some other businesses hot, so we try to let people know what to expect, because we want to keep that business. And a lot of times I have to refer to my sign, this is Prince Hot Chicken you know—but however we do have them plain. We do have plain, so but I try to let new faces know but most of our customers are—have been coming so long they pretty much know. We don't—every now and then we see some new faces, but they know what to expect because they've read about it somewhere or another. But not that many people just wander in here, because we're off the beaten path. **[Laughs]** We're not on the main drive. Oh me.

00:14:42

JY: What about—a lot of businesses and you know more and more people are trying to make—get the food out as fast as they possibly can. You guys—

00:14:51

AJ: This chicken cannot be rushed; it cannot be rushed. To be right it takes time. And then sometimes when we give it to the customers too fast they don't want it; they think something is wrong with it because they're used to waiting. So I find that rather odd, but—that's the way they expect it because that's the way it usually is but it takes time to cook the chicken right.

It's not a fast-food; we're definitely not a fast-food restaurant. It's old-time; it's like old-school.

00:15:33

JY: How—I mean—and I'm not asking for your like techniques but like do you cook it in a deep fryer? How do you cook it?

00:15:40

AJ: Well to move things faster of course we have to have deep fryers. Now we've always started it off in the skillet. I don't know what it is about those cast iron skillets that gives it flavor. We start it off—

00:15:56

JY: You want to start that again? Can we start back with the skillets? There's a cell phone that went off. Sorry; so maybe you could start back with the skillets.

00:16:06

AJ: The best way to cook chicken is in a cast iron skillet. That is the best way to cook—it's something with the flavor that it gives. [*Phone Rings*] Do we need to turn that phone off?

00:16:20

JY: No; it's okay. It's fine; it just so happens that a lot of things are happening right now. He's about to answer it I think. Okay; the best way to cook chicken is in a cast iron skillet.

00:16:32

AJ: Is in a cast iron skillet—no other way.

00:16:34

JY: Can you start—can you say that and keep going?

00:16:37

AJ: Oh okay.

00:16:38

JY: Tell us and then tell us how—because what you were saying was so good. You said that but then you said how you did yours and why you do that—that way.

00:16:44

AJ: Well the flavor is in it for one thing but—.

00:16:47

JY: Let's start back with the best way to cook.

00:16:50

AJ: The best way to cook fried chicken is in a cast iron skillet. Now we have the 17-inch skillets now; they stopped—they used to get up to a lot—much larger than that; they used to—we used to have the 19-inch but now they're down to the 15-inch skillet. It's hard to find the 17 and the 19-inch. Of course you could get more pieces to it, but the flavor is in a cast iron skillet cooked

slow, covered and slow so the flavor can get into it—get into it. That's the best chicken cooked right, smothered, and then take that top off and then that—that's it. You're done.

[Laughs] It's beautiful. That's the best way to cook a piece of fried chicken but—but due to the—you know the flow you've got to move on. You've got to keep moving so you've got to have—restaurants have to have deep fryers. They have to in order to move it.

00:18:09

JY: Are you going to let us see you frying your chicken or are we banned from going back there?

00:18:14

AJ: Well I—I don't allow people in my kitchen because the next thing you know there they go.

[Laughs] I'm hearing about them opening up, so several people have managed to get back there, but of course—of course right now my old stove is down right now so—so as far as my skillet is concerned it's not working right now.

00:18:38

JY: I want you to know I ask you that question not because I really wanted to go back there but just because I wanted to hear you say that because I'm going to need to put that in the movie so that people—people are going to expect me to show pictures of it and I need to be able to put that in there so that they know why.

00:18:51

AJ: Well we—we—that's why we're going to be closed next week because we're doing our

kitchen.

00:18:57

JY: But I just wanted you to know that I wasn't really—I wasn't actually trying to go back there; I just needed to hear you say that.

00:19:03

AJ: Yeah; well we have a lot of pictures from—from it cooking in the skillet and I have one back there on the wall where I'm cooking in the skillet, but it takes a lot of time. It takes up a lot of time and I think that's why people are used to waiting because they see the—the skillets going and we've had as many as 10 skillets going at one time but it still wasn't enough. So—but they're used to waiting and they like it. They like waiting for it. **[Laughs]** But that's a slow way of doing it on a mass basis—on a mass basis; uh-hm.

00:19:38

JY: Now have you ever felt the urge to have a—a bigger restaurant; I mean because I like—I really like how small it is and I like the fact that I might be sitting here waiting and then a stranger may come sit down and we might start to—

00:19:52

AJ: They do that all the time—people—people will be waiting for chicken and a complete stranger—they don't ask you if they could sit down; they just come and sit down **[Laughs]** and think nothing of it and just start—start talking to some of them just want to be quiet and every

now and then they'll let you know they want to be quiet. Don't talk to me. **[Laughs]** But and— and one lady comes in here and she acts like she's going to the library. She always brings her books. **[Laughs]** And she's disappointed when she doesn't get to read all her book and— before the chicken gets done. **[Laughs]** When it gets done before then she's disappointed. Oh me, before she's read her book—have mercy.

00:20:34

JY: How long—how long do you intend on doing this?

00:20:38

AJ: Well until I—as long as I can get up in the morning and get out of the house—I enjoy it. The people—I like the smallness of it because you—you bond with your customers. I—I—I don't—I wouldn't want any place bigger than this because I—I love getting to know my customers and some of them tell you all their business. **[Laughs]** But it's fascinating; I—I just—I just love the—the atmosphere. It just keeps me going. If I stopped this I—I would just be sitting on the porch

[Laughs] looking at the world go by. I'd rather be here watching them come by. **[Laughs]** Oh me, I love; uh-hm.

00:21:27

JY: So it just does it for you? Do you feel like a mom sometimes?

00:21:31

AJ: Oh they call me mom; they call me mom. I give advice all day long; I'm giving advice.

They call me mom; they call me probably a little bit of everything but most of the—most of the fellows call me mom, yeah. And when—when—well peculiar to my race, when a Black man calls another—a woman mom that's a compliment; now it might not be—but to our culture that's a compliment because it shows respect when they say mom or mama.

00:22:13

JY: Since you brought up the idea of race, I want to ask you a question about that. Do you feel like your chicken brings people together, because most—most restaurants you go to Black people and White people don't eat together? I mean it's been my experience—

00:22:26

AJ: You're right.

00:22:27

JY: —that I don't—you know—

00:22:28

AJ: You're right.

00:22:28

JY: —even though that—that schools and all that are desegregated, we go to different churches, we know different restaurants, we live in different neighborhoods and essentially everybody is

still in the South at least pretty segregated, but it seems to me like I've seen this—this restaurant more so than really any place that I've been in the South is a truly integrated place. So tell me—

00:22:50

AJ: That's wild. I don't know; it's—it's very odd but people from all walks of life—we've had chauffeurs come and let whoever out and they come in here and they'll wait. **[Laughs]** We don't know who in the world they are; they've got to be somebody of influence—they have a chauffeur. But people from all walks of life come here and a lot of them have—they—they'll tell you the story of how they grew up on this chicken, their parents took them—went to—to get the chicken when it was at another location when my—my great-uncle had it. So—and I remember the stories when my great-uncle started it the Caucasians ate in the back and of course the—the—well colored that they called back then, Black people ate up front, so they were ushered to the back in my great-uncle's place. So that was during—prior to the Civil Rights Movement, so I mean it's— it has definitely played an integral part in the integration movement. But people come here from all walks of life and think nothing of it.

00:24:13

JY: How about that though; it was reversed?

00:24:15

AJ: Oh yeah, yeah; that—that's—a lot of people—especially the older people can tell you about it. They passed through the kitchen on the way to the very back of the place. **[Laughs]** I—I—I

had seen it one time but it wasn't open for business. When I went—it wasn't open when I went to my uncle's place.

00:24:38

JY: Can you—can you tell us about him?

00:24:39

AJ: That was Thornton Prince—huh?

00:24:40

JY: Who was going to the back?

00:24:41

AJ: The Caucasians, the White went—passed through the kitchen through—they came through the front door but they passed through the kitchen into the back. They were ushered to the back and they had a separate dining area. Yeah; that's—that's a fact. **[Laughs]** That was wild—I thought that was rather weird. **[Laughs]** But they would come from the Grand Ole Opry because it was close to downtown and they would come from the Grand Ole Opry after the show and come and just feast because it—like I say we were known for late-night business and then it stayed open—that's one—that signature is we're open to 4:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday. That's always been so I just try to keep up the family tradition of keeping it open late. Of course—of course now a lot of—several places are open late now and more businesses are selling hot spicy chicken now. I find that weird. **[Laughs]**

00:25:41

JY: Tell me about—tell me about Lorrie Morgan; didn't she steal your recipe or something?

00:25:46

AJ: Oh well Lorrie grew up on this chicken. Her father ate this chicken.

00:25:51

JY: Lorrie who?

00:25:51

AJ: Lorrie Morgan, she grew up on it; her family comes here. They all grew up on it, so her father came to my uncle—great-uncle's place, so it wasn't anything. Lorrie, I've been to a couple of her weddings, so it's—she's a very lovely person and she puts on a very good show—very good show. So I—I—I definitely admire her. But no, my cook once—my cook went to work for her and so I don't—I don't consider her stealing anything. She was just trying to make a living that's all, like we all are trying to make a living.

00:26:31

JY: Well now do you make your cooks sign a gag order or something now that says they're not going—?

00:26:35

AJ: Well I should but I didn't. I didn't; he's back with me now. As a matter of fact he's back there now. [*Laughs*] But he—he wasn't over there too long before he came back. But it—it wasn't the same thing; it wasn't the same thing, but—.

00:26:53

JY: How far are we in—40 minutes? Thirty.

00:26:57

AJ: Oh really?

00:26:59

JY: Can you—does it seem longer or less than that?

00:27:01

AJ: I mean—no, it seems less than that. [*Laughs*] So it is 30 minutes I've been out here?

00:27:06

JY: Yes, ma'am.

00:27:06

AJ: Lord, it's a wonder they haven't burnt the kitchen down. [*Laughs*] I didn't think I had been out here that long—have mercy. But y'all have to be here late at night; that's when the show gets started.

00:27:19

JY: Are you going to be here?

00:27:21

AJ: Oh I'm here 'til 5 o'clock in the morning.

00:27:22

JY: So if we come here tonight and hang out—

00:27:24

AJ: From 5 o'clock in the morning I'll be here. And sometimes the parties come in at 4 o'clock and we have to put them out and then they'll continue to party in the parking lot. We just leave them out there—carousing. So I think it does kind of turn them on [*Laughs*]—aphrodisiac. I don't know what it is. [*Laughs*] It's strange to me. It's funny. Oh me—.

00:28:02

JY: I think we know what we're doing. Go get a nap and come back.

00:28:05

AJ: Well you all need to go and—and take—take a nap; you will definitely need to take a nap.

00:28:11

JY: About 10 o'clock is a good—when does it really get—?

00:28:13

AJ: Well it—it starts late—they quiet down about 8 o'clock and then they—because a lot of people go out for the—entertainment at 10:00. You know people get off from work and they

come back out at 10 o'clock so from 10 o'clock on it's—it gets kind of crazy. So they're—
they're stumbling—they're stumbling. We had one man, he—he couldn't make it to the counter.
He came in and he sat down and his head hit the table and we were closed. We had closed and he
never had ordered. He said what am I going to tell my wife after we woke him up? What am I
going to tell my wife; I told her I was here. I said sir; we have sold completely out of chicken.
We thought you had ordered. I haven't ordered, so we had to go and cook him some more
chicken. **[Laughs]** We got some crazy people coming here; it's always been—it's always a story
here.

00:29:23

JY: What about—a lot of people we've talked to and I know this is indelicate and you don't by
any means have to answer this but a lot of people we've talked to talk about not just how hot the
chicken is today but they talk about how hot it is tomorrow.

00:29:37

AJ: Oh yes; this is a 24-hour chicken—24-hour chicken. One of our customers gets it and he
says he eats it in a tub cup—tub of water. He fills his bath tub full of cold water and that's how
he eats it. And some can't wait; it's like a missile sometimes. Take off like a missile through the
other end. **[Laughs]** I hear all kinds of stories. **[Laughs]**

00:30:11

JY: Everybody has said—everybody has said that.

00:30:

13 **AJ:** But it's a cleansing—it's a cleansing and we need it. We got a lot of infected people so we need that cleansing. [*Laughs*] Oh me, I don't know what the doctors say about it. But we clean them out. [*Laughs*]

00:30:34

JY: That's how we end I guess—we cleanse out.

00:30:38

AJ: I don't know whether that's good or bad. Y'all make sure I see this before y'all play it to anybody.

00:30:45

JY: You did such a good job.

00:30:47

AJ: You think so?

00:30:48

JY: It was so great.

00:30:49

AJ: I mean this—it gets carried away.

00:30:51

JY: Sweet and funny and charming and so pretty.

00:30:53

AJ: Well thank you so much; but this chicken is funny I'll tell you. It is really funny. It is really funny. One—one man—but when you eat it don't put your—don't wipe—when your eyes get watery don't wipe your hands—your eyes with your hands because one man just almost tore up the place. He tore—there were benches—because it had gotten in his eyes and—it's wild. It's wild; you can't touch your eyes with your hands when they water up when you eat this chicken. We've—we've seen some things down here. It's just totally insane. I need to write a book myself. **[Laughs]** Oh me—and not name names. **[Laughs]** Oh me. But it has a world of its own; Hot Chicken has a world of its own—real Hot Chicken, the true Hot Chicken.

00:31:49

[End Andre Jeffries]