

DAVID BIGGS
The Pie Wagon - Nashville, Tennessee
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Interviewer: Jennifer Justus
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[Begin David Biggs-The Pie Wagon]

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Jennifer Justus: Okay, this is Jennifer Justus and I'm here at The Pie Wagon in Nashville, Tennessee, and I'm with —

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David Biggs: David Biggs, B-i-g-g-s.

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JJ: Okay, David could you tell us how you got into this business?

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DB: When I was in college I actually worked in some restaurants to get some spending money so to speak [*Laughs*] and really enjoyed the food service business. And some years went by after that — gosh it was in the early '80s when an old, old restaurant in Nashville became available called Mack's Cafe, and it was located next door to a five-star restaurant. Mack's was started in 1920 and had a, a long, long history from 1920 forward. Sat across from Vanderbilt University Law School. And it was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

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But its specialty was Southern-style meat-and-three. And I purchased the restaurant at that point in time and, and got fully involved in, in the meat-and-three side of the world I guess.

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JJ: And so how old were you then?

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DB: I was 33.

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JJ: And how long were you in Mack's — was that name, right?

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DB: Right.

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JJ: And how long were you there?

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DB: I sold that restaurant in 1990. I bought it in 1984 and sold it and went downtown Nashville with a new concept which was not a meat-and-three but it was an upscale restaurant with a chef and valet and — and all that. And took a property downtown across from Tootsie's, and at the time downtown Nashville was, was kind of the Wild West. It was very, very — hadn't been developed like it is now, so it was a challenge.

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JJ: And what was that restaurant?

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DB: It was called Diamond in the Rough, and actually I had a chef that came in from England. He and his wife moved over, and his brother, his name was Wayne Olsen, and Wayne's brother is Nigel Olsen who is Elton John's drummer. So I wanted to do a music concept in the restaurant, because at Mack's Cafe the majority of the clientele besides Vandy students was the Music Row people. And I had gotten to know all the Music Row folk and went downtown and run a fiber optic line down to a radio station called FM 100 and started Dancing in the District and Live from the District series with a broadcast off a stage that I had in the restaurant.

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JJ: Okay, so and that's interesting because here at this restaurant, The Pie Wagon, I've heard it called the Music Row Commissary. Is that still the case, and do you think that there's still that connection between food and music here in some way?

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DB: Well no doubt about it. You know the, the saying in Nashville is the first thing a musician or a songwriter says to you is "Could I take your order"? **[Laughs]** And, and these people they — you know they're basically Southern people. I mean we have some Australians and some other people but mainly they're, they're raised with this type food. That's how they grew up.

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And then they come to Nashville and get in the music business and it kind of like gives them a taste of home, so to speak—comfort food, so to speak. They — a lot of them — are late-night people obviously. So they're getting up about noontime and they come in and, and have a serving of meat-and-threes. **[Laughs]** So there definitely is a connection, no doubt.

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JJ: Okay, and so Diamond in the Rough and the Dancing in the District and all that, and so then what happened?

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DB: Well actually I sold that restaurant. They — I valet parked at the corner of 5th and Broad, which is now where the arena sits and, and as that area developed down there I realized that without valet parking I was going to be really, really severely hurt. So I sold the restaurant to a gentleman who renamed it and changed it and so forth. And I actually went into another direction involved in the music business. I started managing a new act on Mercury Records, did a lot of tours and, and got into the business end of the music business for a while.

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JJ: Okay, and then was — is this the next place that you were food-wise?

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DB: Yes, uh-hm.

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JJ: Okay, and so how did this come to be?

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DB: [*Laughs*] My wife was out of town one weekend visiting friends in Louisville and I, I was just sitting on the computer messing around and for some reason typed in “restaurants for sale

Nashville.” And this restaurant came up, not the name, but just the, the — an old traditional meat-and-three for sale, email for information.

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And I don’t know why, but I did, and I got a response back and it happened to be somebody that I knew who was the broker on the deal. And he said “Hey, you know this would be a perfect fit since you had the other two and especially Mack’s Cafe. It’s The Pie Wagon, and The Pie Wagon has been in business since 1922.” So I’ve owned two meat-and-threes that were founded around 1920.

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JJ: Did you — when you heard the name The Pie Wagon did you — were you familiar with it when he said that, when you — when you found out that that was the restaurant up for sale?

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DB: Oh I’ve — I’ve eaten at The Pie Wagon 40 years. *[Laughs]* So yeah; I knew it. Sure did.

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JJ: Okay, and that — how big of a gap was it between Diamond in the Rough and this business?

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DB: Oh fifteen years.

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JJ: So what was that like to jump back in, and how did that go?

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DB: It was kind of like riding a bicycle. [*Laughs*] You get back on it, and you may wobble a little bit, but it doesn't take long.

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JJ: Okay, and the — it's been pretty recently, right and within the last —?

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DB: Fourteen months ago.

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JJ: Fourteen months ago. Okay, so what have you kept the same, and what have you changed since you've been here so far?

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DB: Well the main thing I kept the same is the gentleman that has worked in this restaurant for nineteen years now and knew — knows all the customers for nineteen years. So his name is Jerry Cooper and he's an incredible cook also. So I kept — I kept that, or kept Jerry.

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As far as changing, the first thing you always do when you purchase an existing restaurant is close it down and clean it because it has a tendency over time to build up. And we did that for about a two-week period; came in, freshened everything, cleaned it up, and during that time I, I got with Jerry and went over all the recipes he used and how he's prepared the

vegetables and so forth and made some changes in that to kind of bring them up-to-date with the way people like food now — less salt, less sugar, no animal fat, you know that type thing.

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And then added — added some other things on the food line that enhanced what we're doing also.

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JJ: Okay, and talking about the, the changes in making things more healthy, is that a lot different than it was when you had Mack's? Have you seen that really change a lot?

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DB: Completely. As a matter of fact when I was — had Mack's — I had a cook who had been there about twenty-five years and I, I came in one day and said there's no more lard or pork fat going to be — that we're going to use in the turnip greens, the beans, and so forth. And her response was, "If I can't cook with lard or fat I quit." And my response was, "Well I can't believe pig fat and lard is going to make you quit a job." **[Laughs]** "But if that's the case, okay. What can I say?"

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JJ: So is that what happened? Did she leave?

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DB: No, she didn't. **[Laughs]**

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JJ: Okay, well tell me about what you — what are some of the most popular things that, that you have on the menu now and if the — I'm curious about the hot and spicy chicken. Is that still on the menu?

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DB: Oh absolutely. That, that recipe is, is probably sixty-five to seventy years old and the lady who did it is, is still with us. She's in her late eighties, a sweetheart, and when I bought the restaurant I had her come in, and I set a stool in the kitchen, and she sat on the stool three different times while — and told us how to do it. So I definitely kept that tradition. It's a huge seller.

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JJ: How did you find her and how did you know that she was still in town and — if she didn't work here?

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DB: She had worked at — in the restaurant for thirty-five to forty years over time.

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JJ: Is it sort of like a hot chicken? Or is it a more of a fried chicken, spicy, kind of like a Gus's in Memphis, or what's — what is that chicken like?

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DB: It's, it's a rub that we make and we season the chicken with the rub. And then it is — it's slow-fried, so to speak, in cast iron skillets. It takes about an hour and a half to cook it because of the low, low temperature. And it's the cast iron is what really does it honestly.

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JJ: Awesome. So where do you source your ingredients if you don't mind me asking?

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DB: I get them from several different broad-line distributors, some national distributors. I also — there's a new company that just opened called Restaurant Depot, which is an incredible source for this type of restaurant because you can buy so many things at twenty to thirty percent less than from the broad-line guys. And I go there once a week, and then I have a shipment or two a week that comes in.

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JJ: And I think I didn't let you finish on other things that are popular on the menu — maybe the older things and the newer things.

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DB: Well, turnip greens, hand-peeled mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese —we have an incredible macaroni and cheese that we do. The, on the, I guess, and then all your other vegetables that are in season and when they're not we, we use a, a frozen vegetable, which I think is the freshest tasting.

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On the meat side the, the hot chicken is, is big, the fried catfish we do is big. Anything in gravy — it's amazing. **[Laughs]** Hamburger steak in gravy, pork tenderloin, which we hand-cut our tenderloin, trim it and hand-cut it, but you — and then we do a chicken dish, a — it's a fried chicken boneless breast that I fry in the cast iron skillets and then we bake it in a mushroom sauce that we make, and again it's in a gravy, but it's a mushroom gravy. And it's just — like I say, anything that's smothered and covered **[Laughs]**.

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JJ: Okay, and what do you know about the — can you tell me more about the history of this particular restaurant?

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DB: This restaurant — at the turn of the century there were restaurants in — they weren't rail cars, they were actually trolleys on wooden spoke wheels. And they started popping up kind of like the food trucks are today. The same thing, it's just an updated version. And they would pull them from location to location. And when they found a good spot they would park them.

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Well The Pie Wagon name came from those cars back in the — at the turn of the century. They got — became referred to as pie wagons, nothing really to do with pie, just the name of what they called them. This restaurant started as The Majestic Cafe in 1922 by two brothers, set down by the Union Station Hotel from '22 to the mid-'30s when they built the post office. Well they drug the old car to 12th and McGavock, and it didn't quite make the transition from what I understand, so they built a concrete building, and it moved into that and continued as — and

became known then really as The Pie Wagon. We still use Majestic Cafe on the legal side, but it's called The Pie Wagon. But it's been a continuous operating restaurant since 1922.

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It moved to this location in 2002, which is the Faron Young Office Building, Faron Young being a country music singer from the '40s, '50s, and '60s, very popular back then and you're actually sitting in his office. This was his office.

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JJ: And just to explain to people who can't hear, we are at the end of — or can't see — at the end of the steam table. That's where his office would have been.

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DB: Well this, this whole space, the dining room and everything was, was his office. His office was actually over in that area, and then there was some office cubes or you know, but he had two, two ways to get in and out of his office. I don't know why, but he did. *[Laughs]*

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JJ: So this place has music in its walls or —

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DB: The, the recording studios are behind us in the same building still and are used today all the time. People come in, and the Oak Ridge Boys were over there the other day. Bill Gaither did his Christmas Special the other day over there. And across the street is Alabama group's studios. In

the office building next to us, that we're part of, there's four or five publishers in that building, songwriters and publishers.

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JJ: So when they say Music — Music Row Commissary that's definitely — I mean we're right in it.

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DB: Absolutely. Music Row is a block away from us, but yeah, it's — and BMI and ASCAP are sitting right here. You know the giants — the world giants in the publishing. So yeah, it is definitely the Music Row Commissary.

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JJ: So what's a typical day like? Who do you have coming in for breakfast and then for lunch, and what does it look like in here?

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DB: Well breakfast is probably the best kept secret in town. And, and I like it like that. We're here preparing the main dinner meal, lunch meal, so breakfast is, is something that the people who come in are a lot of attorneys going downtown for meetings. They're, they're music executive people who want to meet and not get involved in other conversations that other restaurants that are very, very busy. They, they can't focus on what they're doing. A lot of songwriters come through, so a normal breakfast for us is not a busy time, but it's pretty

interesting in the cast of characters — everybody from, from the mayor's aides to a lot of the city's top people, a lot of attorneys and music people.

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JJ: So breakfast — is it important for you to have for that reason or, or I guess, why is it that you do offer breakfast, because it—you probably wouldn't have to? I don't know.

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DB: Well the main thing is we're here, and I've got two people who are really, really good on the grill. We do breakfast to order; it's not a buffet serving thing. And it's just extra revenue basically, and breakfast is your most profitable food item in the restaurant business other than pizza. But from just a normal restaurant, breakfast is the highest margin.

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And so if we're here and we're, you know, we're here anyway.

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JJ: Okay, and then what about lunch?

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DB: Lunch is, is, is what makes the restaurant continue to operate. And it changes every day. It's new selections every day. The menu is — we're only open Monday through Friday, but the menu changes daily for the lunch side. And you get people who develop their favorites, and so every day you — well you do have repeat customers for sure. It's, you know, kind of know who

is coming in on chicken and dressing day. You kind of have an idea who is showing up on catfish day. And it makes it a lot of fun.

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JJ: It seems like you — well I don't want to put words in your mouth — but seem to like this, like this type of restaurant. What is it about this type of restaurant that you like?

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DB: I, I grew up with this type food. My grandparents were great cooks. My mom was a great cook. My dad was also. He was — he did all the grocery shopping, and I just grew up around it and enjoyed it. And it's, it's — I like watching people eat what they really enjoy eating. And I love the comments coming back — both — sometimes negative. I mean you're not going to satisfy everybody. But when I hear a negative comment I try to turn it into a positive, and if it's something I need to change, I do it. If it's something that the customer needs to change [*Laughs*] I don't say that to them but, but I just am comfortable with this type food.

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JJ: Where did you grow up, and can you tell me a little bit about — do you cook too?

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DB: Oh I, I cook every day. Yeah, I'm, I'm big into the kitchen. I grew up down in North Alabama, Muscle Shoals, which is a music area also. A lot of my friends that I grew up with went on to become extremely successful in the music business. As a kid I hung around the studios down there doing cartage and things like that, and just have always enjoyed music.

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So it's Muscle Shoals and it's, it's definitely in the Deep South, and it's steeped in this meat-and-three tradition.

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JJ: How did you get to Nashville?

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DB: I moved to Nashville in 1976 with a, a job, coming out of college.

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JJ: Okay, it's been said that Nashville has more meat-and-threes than other Southern cities.

What do you make of that? Do you think that's true, and if, if you do think it's true, why is that?

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DB: Well I didn't realize that. That's honestly the first time I've heard, I've heard that. I'm familiar with a lot of the meat-and-threes, so to speak, but I'm only thinking of like four or five that I think probably have the majority of the, of the business in the meat-and-threes as far as in Metro Nashville. Now there's a lot on, you know, on out-of-town or headed out-of-town, but the, the four or five that, that I think really have the business, all are, are old restaurants, been around a long time from Rotiers to Arnold's to Sylvan Park to —. And so I, you know I, I guess being where we are in, in the South and a lot of people now moving to Nashville from —. I've had it said to me many times in this past year, people from California, New York, Chicago, Denver,

Dallas — “If you could open one of these up where I’m from you would not believe the — you know, how, how well it would do.”

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And that’s, of course, is in the back of my mind a little bit. It would be fun to try something like that in a — in a town you’d like to spend some time in. But, but I hear that a lot from people moving into this area who haven’t experienced, and they’ll come through the serving line and say, “It’s the first time I’ve ever been in a meat-and-three. How does it work?” You know, “What do I do? Can I only get three?” I mean, questions that you don’t even think would ever come up. **[Laughs]** “Can I only get three vegetables?” And some people get six because it’s their first experience, so —.

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JJ: What do you think makes a meat-and-three?

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DB: A clean restaurant, good Southern cooks who know how to season, and especially today the way you have to season to still give it a flavor of having a meat product in it. That’s a trick. That is a real trick. The way it’s prepared, the care that goes into it, because it’s all done every day from scratch. There is — there’s no commissary food brought in. It’s you. I come in at basically five o’clock in the morning for a meal that doesn’t start serving until around 10:45 to 11:00 so you’re — you’re spending five hours every day just getting ready for a two — two and a half hour serving.

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And it's — I think that's, you know, it's — it's done that way. It's done from scratch every day.

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JJ: What's your favorite thing about this business? What's the most difficult about this business?

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DB: The favorite thing is, is watching people enjoy the food that you've prepared every day. That — I mean, and the — the, the conversations going on at the — at the tables. While I'm not talking about eavesdropping, I'm just talking about one table will be guys who have just had the number one hit country song. Right next to him it'll be guys who are planning for the marathon race and want streets to close down. The other table it'll be some attorneys talking about the Supreme Court decision coming down. I mean it's, it's just a complete mixture of customers that come in. And there will be a group of painters, mechanics, body shop guys, and they're all in the same room, and they're all enjoying really good food and talking about things that cover all spectrums in society. And that's — that's really neat to see every day and to, to watch.

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JJ: What about — what about what's most difficult?

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DB: Five o'clock in the morning. **[Laughs]** Most difficult probably is, is keeping it clean and, and closing down every day because you, you're tired. You're ready to go, but you have to do

some things, so it'll be ready for the next day. You're, you're — and it's a long day. It's, it's basically a twelve to thirteen-hour day.

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JJ: Can you sort of walk me through what a typical day might be?

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DB: For, for me personally? Huh, yeah, I'll, I'll do probably twenty-five to thirty pounds of carrots; peel, slice twenty to thirty pounds of potatoes every morning to keep up with that; and then I'll cook anywhere up to sixty-seventy pounds of meat every day. Then you serve. You're on your feet constantly. Then you have to carve out some time for paperwork, because it's unending, especially even on a small business owner. It is incredible what the government sends you to fill out every — all the time.

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Keeping it clean, keeping your employees motivated, keeping them motivated and in the right attitude, because they get tired too. Everybody gets tired. So it, you know, it's, it's a pretty demanding day, long and on your feet and physical. If you — it's really physical.

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JJ: And your, your wife makes the pies? So how did that come to be and, and what kinds do you offer?

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DB: Well I'm, I'm real lucky, absolutely, and she started when we bought the restaurant. She and I bought the restaurant. Started making pies then and experimenting to see what would go over, and so forth, and she's a great dessert maker-baker. She loves to bake. And over time it's narrowed down to really just two pies: a chocolate chess fudge and a pecan, Southern pecan. But she won't let me bring home — or bring home — she won't let me bring any ingredients except all natural everything. **[Laughs]** And that's really what makes the quality for sure. There's no doubt.

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JJ: Speaking of home, do you cook at home and what — if you do — what do you make?

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DB: Well yeah, I do cook at home. Spaghetti, that's true. I cook spaghetti, which is a favorite of the family. I do a lot of grilling. I like to grill, you know, chicken barbecue and steaks and so forth. On the vegetable side, quite honestly, I'll bring home from the restaurant a lot of the vegetables, because why not? **[Laughs]**

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JJ: What about prices back from when you had Mack's to here? How has that changed or stayed the same in this type of business?

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DB: Well they haven't escalated anywhere close to what your, your higher priced restaurants have. You know at, at Mack's back in the mid-'80s, a meat-and-three, coffee, tea, dessert would

run about \$8.50. Today in here it runs about \$11, so about a twenty-five percent increase basically over 20 years. And that's another thing that's demanding about this restaurant is how do you put out top quality food, fresh ingredients on prices that have held around the \$10 mark for a meat-and-three plate? It's, it's hard. It's very hard.

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JJ: And I'm curious about the keeping the, the vegetables seasoned without the pork products. Without, you know, I'm not asking you to give away any secrets, but what, what do you — how do you get to that? How do you — how do you handle that?

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DB: Well that's the secret. [*Laughs*] That is the secret. There's some — there's some ingredients that have come on the market in probably the last ten or twelve years that are natural ingredients, but the, the way they've been blended together gives your taste buds a, a sense of the old-fashioned pork and, and lard and stuff like — more the pork side than anything because that's, that's mainly what vegetables were seasoned with in the early, earlier days was, was the pork.

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And so there's, there's some things you can use now. It's just a matter of how much to put in, in the volume that you're preparing.

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JJ: And do you get a lot of questions from customers — “What’s in this, and is this healthy?” Or are you — do they miss it, or do they — are they glad they don’t have it? How — what kind of reaction do you get there?

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DB: You do. You get — you get a lot of questions. It’s amazing the allergies in, in things that people have these days that you never heard twenty-five to thirty years ago. Lemon, lemon, citrus, peanuts, I don’t know, and you get questions every day by somebody asking, “Is, is there any lemon in this catfish batter?” You know things like that, and you go, “Why?” “Well I’m allergic to it.” “Oh okay.” So you have to know what — you know what your ingredients are for sure to answer those questions.

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But people are more aware today. I guess more aware. They’re more concerned with what they’re eating. The main thing I get is, “How do you season these turnip greens? I don’t see any meat product in them.” And, and they appreciate it. And the vegetables, a lot of vegetarians come through because of that. And in the old days, quite honestly, you would tell a vegetarian when you saw one, “No, we don’t use meat, and you’d go back in the kitchen, and you’d pull out the *[Laughs]* — the signs of it.”

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JJ: Well what about the music business? Do you miss it?

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DB: No, not — not really. I'm, I'm still very close to friends who are in the business, so I'm — I've kind of got my finger on the pulse of what's going on and so forth. But it's — being away from home is, is something I don't miss whatsoever and in that business. You're gone.

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JJ: Okay, is there anything else you want to tell me about your business, or about the history of this place, or meat-and-threes? Any of that?

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DB: Well I — you know it's — it's a business that if you don't thoroughly love and enjoy and have the full support of your wife and your family you — you better not consider going into it. It's, it's not a business you're going to become extremely wealthy. The — as we discussed, the pricing hasn't escalated like gasoline or, or anything else. So it's very restrictive on that side of it. It, it, it's something — it's kind of like if it's in your blood then you're going to be okay. If it's — you're not willing to really put in a sixty to seventy-hour week and , and encounter handling up to — in this location about 1,000 people a week coming through again — you better not go into it.

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It, it's the only business, and I've been involved in quite a few other industries, but it's the only business where every facet of business is involved. You have to ship, receive, inventory, manufacture when you're doing your food, you have to be an accountant. I mean there is no business that is not involved in the restaurant business. Every single facet is.

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So it's, it's fun if you like it. It's drudgery if you don't. **[Laughs]**

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JJ: And what's next for this place and for you that you would want to share?

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DB: Well my wife and I have a son who works with us down here. He's graduated from high school this year. And he has the grand vision of going to Aspen and opening up The Pie Wagon — or LA or wherever. And he's become involved. He enjoys the business. He's a good people person. And, and he's not afraid of work. He'll sit down next to it all day long. **[Laughs]** But that's, you know, and I'd like to maybe see that happen. I think it would be fun for me to watch that.

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JJ: Okay, well thank you so much for your time. And I have one last question that I think I should have asked at the beginning. What is your age?

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DB: I am 62. **[Laughs]**

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JJ: Okay, thank you so much for your time.

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DB: I'll be 63—. **[Laughs]**

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[End David Biggs-The Pie Wagon]