

Interview: Norma Jean Darden  
Interviewer: Tonya Hopkins  
Interview Date: March 23, 2005

December 15, 2005

**SFA Founders Oral History Project**

**NORMA JEAN DARDEN**

**Interviewer: Tonya Hopkins, SFA Member**  
**Location: Miss Mamie's Restaurant-New York, NY**  
**Date: March 23, 2005**

**[Begin Norma Jean Darden Interview]**

0:00:00.6

**Tonya Hopkins:** It's Wednesday, March 23rd (2005); it's about 7:15 p.m. I'm at Miss Mamie's Restaurant with Miss Norma Jean Darden.

0:00:15.0

**Norma Jean Darden:** Hello, let's try it again.

0:00:20.1

**TH:** All right, so the first question we have here on the SFA Founders Oral History Project questionnaire is how did you come to be involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

0:00:33.1

**NJD:** Well, John T. Edge called me up and asked me to come down and perform my play about three summers ago at the University of Mississippi at Oxford; and that was the first I knew of Southern [Foodways] Alliance. I was very happy to go and to be a part of a wonderful conference for the weekend. And I met a lot of wonderful people, some of whom I'm still in touch with.

0:00:57.1

**TH:** What was the play?

0:00:59.2

**NJD:** Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine.

0:01:00.2

**TH:** Oh, wonderful.

0:01:01.4

**NJD:** And I had just done it at the American Place Theater in New York, and I guess that's how he heard of me.

0:01:08.7

**TH:** Uh-hm--uh-hm; now was the Alliance already formed then?

0:01:11.2

**NJD:** That was when he was in the process of forming it. I think that was their first big meeting.

0:01:15.3

**TH:** Okay.

0:01:16.2

**NJD:** And then I met again with them in Birmingham when they went to the *Southern Living Magazine* headquarters and unfortunately I haven't gotten back to any of the other meetings.

0:01:29.8

**TH:** I was Birmingham, too, last June?

0:01:32.7

**NJD:** It was the year before that.

0:01:35.4

**TH:** A year before that? Okay, okay.

0:01:35.5

**NJD:** Yeah. [The SFA Founders' meeting was in Birmingham, July 1999]

0:01:37.8

**TH:** Oh right; because they--we--they have another event there, okay. Let's see; were you involved with either of the Southern Food organizations that predated the Southern Foodways Alliance?

0:01:50.8

**NJD:** No.

0:01:51.0

**TH:** No, okay. That's the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Foods.

0:01:55.4

**NJD:** No.

0:01:57.2

**TH:** Or the American Southern Food Institute.

0:01:58.4

**NJD:** No, never heard of them.

0:02:00.1

**TH:** Okay. Did you go to the organizational meeting in Birmingham in the summer of 1999?

0:02:05.5

**NJD:** Yes.

0:02:06.4

**TH:** Okay. And if so what do you recall about it?

0:02:09.4

**NJD:** I remembered going to the wonderful restaurants in Birmingham, the great food, the nice hospitality we received at --at the *Southern Living Magazine* headquarters, the beautiful way that they were blended into nature and the stones in the water.

0:02:28.4

**TH:** It is a beautiful building.

0:02:28.8

**NJD:** Yes; it was just beautifully laid out and wonderful fields, glass, and nature.

0:02:36.1

**TH:** A nice combination.

0:02:38.4

**NJD:** A nice blend of nature and--and fields and glass--shelter and nature.

0:02:47.1

**TH:** What was your vision for the Southern Foodways Alliance when it began?

0:02:51.8

**NJD:** Well that they would keep the wonderful tradition of Southern cooking alive in people's minds and--and revitalizing the notion and getting away from so much standardized food and fast-foods and keeping the wonderful individual touches of slow-cooked food.

0:03:15.5

**TH:** Because your--has your vision evolved in any way and if so, how?

0:03:21.3

**NJD:** Well, I'm careful to not do anything with shortcuts.

0:03:29.2

**TH:** Like I just was talking about. [*Laughs*]

0:03:34.3



**NJD:** Yes, we do everything the long, old-fashioned way--from our potato salad to our ribs to the collard greens--and we have nothing canned or preserved that would detract from, you know, the old-fashioned concept of Southern food.

0:03:50.7

**TH:** Uh-hm; I was going to say for example, but like you said, you use whole potatoes; you don't use--you're not using a box, you know.

0:03:59.6

**NJD:** No, not a box for anything. Yeah.

0:04:04.3

**TH:** Okay.

0:04:04.9

**NJD:** And that resolve—is the strength in my resolve not to go into things that are cheaper in a restaurant, things that are cheaper and easier but stick to the hard and fast task of old-fashioned Southern foods.

0:04:22.3

**TH:** And so the vision that you had for the Alliance back in '99 in Birmingham has that evolved in any ways for you?

0:04:27.3

**NJD:** Well, I opened the second restaurant, and they're doing the same thing there.

0:04:32.5

**TH:** Uh-hm; and what's the name of that one?

0:04:33.6

**NJD:** Miss Maude's.

0:04:35.9

**TH:** Miss Maude's, okay.

0:04:36.4

**NJD:** Well Miss Mamie was named for my mother.

0:04:38.0

**TH:** I was going to ask you who--okay Mamie was your mom, okay.

0:04:41.3

**NJD:** And then Miss Maude was our grandmother.

0:04:43.9

**TH:** Her mother?

0:04:45.0

**NJD:** No, actually it was my father's substitute mother. Because his mother died when he was young, and she was actually the wife of his oldest brother. But she was the only grandmother that we knew.

0:05:00.7

**TH:** That you guys had. Okay; let's see here. It says did you attend the first symposium in 1998 and--and what do you recall of that?

0:05:09.7

**NJD:** Where was it?

0:05:10.7

**TH:** It doesn't say but it was--it was in '98.

0:05:14.0

**NJD:** I think that's the one that was at the Oxford--in Mississippi.

0:05:18.8

**TH:** At the same time that you performed the play?

0:05:20.9

**NJD:** Yes; I think that was '98, if I'm not mistaken.

0:05:24.1

**TH:** Uh-hmm. Okay, what do you recall about that?

0:05:27.0

**NJD:** Well, that was marvelous! It was the first time that any of us had come together. People came from Barcelona, Spain--came from all over and to know that you had something in common with all these people from Texas and Louisiana and--and Charleston; it was just marvelous to know there were people in the world with the same thoughts that you had. And that's what John Edge accomplished by bringing everyone together.

0:05:55.4

**TH:** Okay; great. It says are there any particular moments from that gathering or from others that stand out in your mind--any specific moments?

0:06:03.2

**NJD:** Oh, there for me [*Emphasis Added*] first of all, was performing my play in front of the Confederate Flag in Oxford, Mississippi! [*Laughs*] That I'll never forget. The second one was discovering someone who was from my mother's birthplace who was in the audience and knew some of the people that I was talking about in the play. That was just extraordinary.

0:06:24.4

**TH:** And where--where is your mom from?

0:06:25.8

**NJD:** Camden, Alabama.

0:06:26.6

**TH:** Camden?

0:06:27.6

**NJD:** Yeah.

0:06:28.0

**TH:** I was born in Camden, New Jersey. [*Laughs*]

0:06:31.7

**NJD:** Oh, okay. That's a far cry--. [*Laughs*]

0:06:33.4

**TH:** Yes, totally.

0:06:33.5

**NJD:** You and Mayor Dinkins [Mayor of New York City from 1990-1993].

0:06:37.4

**TH:** Really? I didn't know that; okay. Okay. So performing the play in front of the Confederate Flag and then how--?

0:06:42.7

**NJD:** Yeah; and in front of the statue that they put--that had been put there by the Daughter's of the American Revolution. [*Laughs*]

0:06:48.3

**TH:** How--how did that make you feel, specifically?

0:06:50.3

**NJD:** Very, very strange since I was--a lot of my play dealt with slavery.

0:06:57.1

**TH:** Did it make you feel uncomfortable or--?

0:06:59.9

**NJD:** No, I thought it was very liberating for the people there. *[Laughs]*

0:07:05.0

**TH:** Oh, I like that; that's an interesting twist on it. Okay, so let's see. Tell us about your role in developing the Southern Foodways Alliance mission--I'm just going to say SFA going forward--and vision and programming?

0:07:21.5

**NJD:** Well, I live it every day in the restaurant. Yes. And what was nice was--was to know that people are doing this all over the United States and all over the world.



0:07:37.1

**TH:** Okay. The SFA focuses upon food as culture. What does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

0:07:47.9

**NJD:** Well personally it meant that meals were a time to come together and talk, and the family came together every day at a certain time, and we never failed to do that, and we didn't take calls when we were eating. Now of course, I think that kind of dining is almost over with. **[Laughs]** People have cell phones; they're interrupted. They spend half their meal talking on the cell phone. Nobody ever says *I'm having a meal; can I call you back?* anymore. If you call them they'll just talk to you right through that time, and I think that's unfortunate because mentally it keeps you so alert when food and thought are all streaming together. But people eat on the run these days. They grab a McDonald's, eat it in the subway, and that's lunch. **[Coughs]**

0:08:45.5

**TH:** Are you okay? That's interesting--I like what you said about food and thought. What do you mean?

0:08:50.7

**NJD:** Well because it's a time to relax [coughs] your body [takes drink] and nourish yourself and your--and--and I think the dining allows people to express themselves. It was a time to get together and discuss the news of the day and I don't think we take time like that. A lot of people have their meals in front of the television, so they're not expressing; they're just absorbing and shouting back into the television. [*Laughs*] And so culturally, food--the high art of dining--has dissolved into televisions—fast food and television. And I think that's the thing that Southern Foodways is bucking. And it's nice to know that a lot of people are bucking it at the same time. And you find little children with the keys around their neck; they go home and they just eat out of the icebox. You know there's not really a meal put down; they'll grab a pizza, put it in their little microwave, turn on the television and watch cartoons. [*Laughs*] And I just see that the socializing effect that meals had when I was young is sort of vanishing. You know, I imagine a few people are keeping it alive, but in the big cities it's very hard.

0:10:16.2

**TH:** Yeah.

0:10:17.7

**NJD:** And people have so many--such hectic schedules that you can barely get a family to eat together at the same time. This one is going to ballet, you know, the mother is at the gym, the

father is still at work; it's very hard to come together for meals like we used to, which was just our daily ritual.

0:10:36.5

**TH:** Really?

0:10:37.8

**NJD:** Uh-hm.

0:10:38.8

**TH:** At the end of the day everybody was like--?

0:10:41.4

**NJD:** It wasn't the end of the day; it was like at five o'clock.

0:10:44.4

**TH:** Okay.

0:10:44.7

**NJD:** Yes, and we ate in the daylight. And now people just don't get around to food until--until late at night.

0:10:54.0

**TH:** You--you grew up down South or--?

0:10:55.8

**NJD:** I grew up half in Newark, New Jersey, where my father had his practice, and half in Wilson, North Carolina, where my father was from, and where we spent our summers.

0:11:05.3

**TH:** Summers, right--right.

0:11:06.5

**NJD:** Yeah.

0:11:07.0

**TH:** You got the experience of actually--

0:11:09.1

**NJD:** Of both.

0:11:09.7

**TH:** --being in the South. But you're right---I'm from New Jersey and we had--I didn't realize this until later that we were actually eating and--and carrying on Southern food traditions in North Jersey--in New Jersey.

0:11:21.2

**NJD:** Yes.

0:11:23.4

**TH:** You know, but as a child it was just--that was just life, you know.

0:11:24.9

**NJD:** Right.

0:11:27.0

**TH:** And we went to other people's houses, and I was like *how come ya'll don't have you know*  
*[Laughs] black-eyed peas and greens and you know--and all this kind of stuff?*

0:11:32.7

**NJD:** Yes, or sweet potatoes. Food, yeah.

0:11:36.2

**TH:** And even though I wasn't born in the South, I realized later that the Southern food tradition was carrying on in—in our kitchen.

0:11:43.2

**NJD:** In the North. Yes, and if you went out to Seattle, you'd see the same thing.

0:11:47.9

**TH:** Right; I went to--I don't know if this is on the record or not--I went to the Kingfish Cafe--  
the restaurant in Seattle owned by two sisters, two black women that--.

0:11:56.9

**NJD:** Oh, really?

0:11:57.9

**TH:** It's this Southern food restaurant--that was--that was established somewhere in the mid-  
[nineteen]90s, maybe. I was really surprised--

0:12:07.3

**NJD:** Oh.

0:12:07.2

**TH:** --to--to see it. The friends I stayed with made sure I saw it because they know I'm into  
Southern cooking.

0:12:11.5

**NJD:** Oh, wow.

0:12:13.9

**TH:** Yeah, so it's funny you said Seattle.

0:12:14.2

**NJD:** Yeah.

0:12:16.1

**TH:** I was there a couple months ago. Let's see. Okay, do you have any ideas for the future of the organization? Any specific projects you'd like to see happen or topics that you would like studied?

0:12:30.6

**NJD:** Well, I was very happy to see they came out with a cookbook. I thought that was wonderful! John T. Edge went all around and put a book together. I thought that was wonderful and I'd love to see--that was great coming out of that experience.

0:12:46.0



**TH:** So you'd like to see more--?

0:12:47.0

**NJD:** See more books, yes.

0:12:49.5

**TH:** Are you talking about *Cornbread Nation* or--?

0:12:50.7

**NJD:** Yeah. And is that his second book or first?

0:12:55.1

**TH:** Well he--he personally has written books. He's got a couple cookbooks he himself as the author, and he just recently did the fried chicken book [*Fried Chicken: An American Story*] and the apple pie book [*Apple Pie: An American Story*]. But the organization, to my knowledge, has put out two editions of *Cornbread Nation*, *Volume One* and *Volume Two*.

0:13:14.1

**NJD:** Oh, okay.

0:13:15.7

**TH:** And it's a compilation of writers who are in the Southern Foodways [Alliance] who have written special pieces that are compiled in the book.

0:13:23.4

**NJD:** Oh, I didn't even know about that. I want to get one. I want to give them to my peeps.

*[Laughs]*

0:13:28.1

**TH:** Yeah. Well, yeah, I don't know when the next one is coming out but, you know, definitely get with him about that.

0:13:35.2

**NJD:** Oh, okay. I have never been able to get him here. Every time he's in New York, he's always rushing.

**TH:** You know, I think he—

**[Audio Skips]**

**NJD:** More books would be great.

0:13:43.9

**TH:** More books. And so you--would you like to be involved in--

0:13:45.6

**NJD:** Oh, sure, yes.

0:13:46.9

**TH:** --to produce a book on be--or write a book on behalf of the Southern Foodways?

0:13:50.9

**NJD:** Well, not a whole book, but I will contribute, yes--yes.

0:13:53.3

**TH:** About something you could cover now. Okay.

0:13:55.7

**NJD:** Uh-hm.

0:13:55.5

**TH:** All right. Oh, a personal question. It says here—we--we kind of touched on this a little bit but the date and place of your birth?

0:14:07.6

**NJD:** Oh, goodness. Well I don't generally share that, but I was born in Newark, New Jersey, and when I was nine months old I was taken to Wilson, North Carolina, and that's again the trek of my life--going back and forth.

0:14:21.4

**TH:** Okay.

0:14:21.5

**NJD:** Yes; but I was born November 4<sup>th</sup>, and I'm a Scorpio.

0:14:24.2

**TH:** And you're a Scorpio?

0:14:25.3

**NJD:** Yes.

0:14:26.8

**TH:** And you're going to--okay we got the date but you're going to supply--?

0:14:29.1

**NJD:** And you never ask a Southern woman her age! John T. knows better than that. [*Laughs*]

0:14:34.7

**TH:** That's why I showed you that! I'm like, that was *not* my question. [*Laughs*] Okay, please tell us about the food of your childhood--who prepared it, what were some typical meals and--?

0:14:49.1

**NJD:** Well, my mother prepared the food in our household and her--one of her big claims of fame was her soup. They were alphabet soups. And this was soup so hearty it could be a whole meal. In fact, my father ate it with just a sweet potato added to it, and that was the whole dinner. We really looked forward to it because she would boil bones and with some--well I don't know what kind of meat it was now. But it would boil for hours and she would add her tomatoes and okra and corn, and we just felt that that was the most--and our father brainwashed us into thinking we would never get sick if we ate this hearty soup in the winter. And she would make oh, just goo-gobs of it and freeze it, and we would have it for all the winter. And she was very known for that. And the other thing that was so precious that she would do with us, when the first snow would fall we would go out and collect snow, and we would have snow ice cream.

0:15:49.5

**TH:** Oh, what is that? How do you--how does that work?

0:15:52.4

**NJD:** Well, you collect the fresh snow before it gets too—before—when you have enough, you put in cream and sugar and vanilla and that's it.

0:15:59.2

**TH:** And you stir it?

0:16:00.9

**NJD:** Stir it and eat it, and it was snow ice cream. And oh, we just thought that was the best stuff in the world. And you'd eat it fast before it would melt.

0:16:09.1

**TH:** That must have been so fun.

0:16:11.0

**NJD:** It was fun.

0:16:12.2

**TH:** To do--for a kid to go collect snow and turn it into ice cream.

0:16:14.7

**NJD:** Oh, yes. Right.

0:16:16.6

**TH:** Wow. Wow. And that would have been in Newark, of course. Not in North Carolina?

0:16:19.7

**NJD:** Right. That—oh, yes.

0:16:20.4

**TH:** It didn't snow that much down there.

0:16:22.9

**NJD:** That was up here. And I was never there in the winter--only the summer season.

0:16:27.5

**TH:** Right; winter-break--okay; so it's--and the last part of that question says describe the ceremony of those meals that you'd had--those meals of your childhood.

0:16:39.7



**NJD:** Well the other meals I remember, of course, were Christmas and Thanksgiving because they were big ceremonial meals. And we would have the obligatory turkey that was a dried mess. I always hated turkey until recently. *[Laughs]*

0:16:53.4

**TH:** Really?

0:16:54.8

**NJD:** Uh-hm, because it was always so dry because they used to cook the turkeys for eight hours. They thought that was sanitary, but it's much better to have it a little more moist. And they would baste it, but I just remember how dry it was. And it used to be we had fancy china and company and your party dress, and it was all very formal. And champagne was served, and we would get ginger ale in our--in our [champagne] flute.

0:17:23.3

**TH:** In your flute?

0:17:24.6

**NJD:** Yes. *[Laughs]*

0:17:24.1

**TH:** How cute. So okay--so any other--any other ceremony or ritual or any other like--like anything else that comes to mind with those meals?

0:17:34.3

**NJD:** Well, I remember cranberry sauce would come out of the can. I just--and now that I think about it, I didn't really like anything. [*Laughs*] I didn't like the turkey; I didn't like the cranberry sauce. I'm so glad we make homemade cranberries now. And then you'd have olives and celery; that was mandatory.

0:17:57.3

**TH:** What was that? My grandmother used to make that: celery and olives.

0:17:57.7

**NJD:** Yes. Everybody--celery and olives and maybe a carrot stick, and everybody had the same thing. It was all--it was in the [nineteen] '50s, so that was--that was what your holiday dinner was in the '50s. [*Laughs*]

0:18:11.5

**TH:** Yeah. Yeah, Interesting. I wonder what the cultural influences were on that.

0:18:15.8

**NJD:** I don't know.

0:18:17.6

**TH:** Okay, here's a good question. When did you first cultivate an interest in food? What and who was the catalyst?

0:18:24.5

**NJD:** I think when I finished college I suddenly got interested in food.

0:18:28.5

**TH:** Where did you go to college?

0:18:30.4

**NJD:** Sarah Lawrence. And I remember making some sautéed bananas with a strawberry sauce on it, and some little boy called me on the phone, and I burned my entire kitchen down. That was my first experiment with cooking. *[Laughs]*

0:18:48.2

**TH:** You are kidding?

0:18:50.5

**NJD:** No. And I thought my mother would kill me.

0:18:50.2

**TH:** In the college dorm?

0:18:52.2

**NJD:** No, in my house. And my mother had just redecorated her kitchen, and the bananas flambé caught on fire and went all the way to the ceiling and melted down the thing that was holding the lights. And when we got--we were nervous wrecks and our mother had gone to pick up our Aunt Norma from North--who was visiting *us* from Wilson [North Carolina] that summer,

and we didn't know whether to call the Fire Department. We were swatting flames, and I remember that being my first meal, and I almost burned down the house. **[Laughs]**

0:19:24.3

**TH:** What happened? So what--did--how—oh, man. Like what was the outcome? I guess all that--.

0:19:30.2

**NJD:** She had to--yeah; get the insurance and everything, but she thought it was funny. She didn't get mad.

0:19:33.9

**TH:** You didn't get in trouble?

0:19:34.8

**NJD:** Um-mm. [No]

0:19:37.9

**TH:** Wow. [*Laughs*]

0:19:40.0

**NJD:** [*Laughs*]

0:19:40.4

**TH:** Okay. So how did you get your first job working, writing, or dealing with food?

0:19:47.3

**NJD:** Let's see; I was working on a movie called *The Cotton Club* and the food editor--no, no,  
no

**TH:** The movie?

**NJD:** The movie.

0:19:56.9

**TH:** You were acting?

0:19:57.4

**NJD:** I was acting in it, and I was the researcher. And Channel 13, they had a Producer, Yvonne--I think it was Yvonne--but she had a party for all the Channel 13(ers) and she invited me and everyone was to bring a dish, and I brought a quiche. And they loved my quiche, and they asked me to do a party there for grandchildren and grandparents. It was Grandparents Day, and my sister and I made little cheese sandwiches and flowers and--and ducks, and the little kids loved them, and we had painted cookies. And the adults thought they were so pretty. So Channel 13 hired me again and again and again, and we didn't even know we were caterers until after about six or seven jobs. *[Laughs]*

0:20:50.2

**TH:** So you--you weren't like formally-- you hadn't gone into it with the intent to cater? *[Audio Skips]* Okay; so you made a quiche and it led to a catering gig?

0:21:02.9

**NJD:** It led to a whole career.

0:21:04.6

**TH:** Wow. Was it ever like formally--I don't know if there's a place to go and learn catering?

0:21:09.4

**NJD:** Well, I did. I went to the New York Restaurant School and took a course, yeah.

0:21:20.2

**TH:** Well, this is good. This is nice weather.

0:21:21.7

**NJD:** Yeah. Oh my goodness, he doesn't even have a hook for his coat. [Talking about a customer coming in.] [To other customer] Can you move your bag so he can put his coat up? And that jacket has been there for years?

0:21:36.8

*[Interview resumes]*

**TH:** So how have you seen Southern food evolve over the course of your lifetime?

0:21:42.5



**NJD:** I've seen it disappear. When I used to go to Wilson, North Carolina, and when I would go to Opelika, Alabama, there would be little restaurants that had all their own food. Now when I go to Wilson, I don't know if I'm in Wilson *or* Opelika because they all have Pizza Hut; they all have Burger King; they all have McDonald's; they all have Pancake House. And the chains have gobbled up everything. So you almost never see the--the little--the little guy in his little restaurant cooking his own thing. And the food is flattened out into burgers, and it's just flattened out terribly, and I just hate that.

0:22:37.4

**TH:** Wow, so in a lot of ways really they haven't evolved to you. I mean, so that's the opposite of evolving really?

0:22:43.4

**NJD:** Yes, I've just seen the growth of fast-food just take over and dominate everything, and people can't compete with the prices.

0:22:54.0

**TH:** So that's interesting you said—because you talk about when you go down South—what about Southern food--?

0:22:58.5

**NJD:** [Talking to employee] This thing fell over right in the doorway.

0:23:04.9

**TH:** You were talking about Southern food when you go in—to the South. What about Southern food outside of the South, like--?

0:23:12.5

**NJD:** Oh, there you fair very well. And in the bigger cities there's a whole wave of people who are doing what I do, so that's a good thing. But in the little towns it's very hard for people to compete with the chains because they have such great prices, since they buy in such bulk, you know. So it's hard for them to charge the right price and still make a profit. So you see so many little people going out of business in the little towns in the South.

0:23:42.1

**TH:** That's really kind of ironic, isn't it? So it's in the cities where the food is that--actually--.

0:23:49.7

**NJD:** Yes, yes.

0:23:50.9

**TH:** You know, being from smaller places I would think—and towns--I don't know. I'm just kind of thinking out loud.

0:24:00.1

**NJD:** Uh-hm.

0:24:02.5

**TH:** Like okay--like I'm always interested like--I still haven't gone to all of the places up here, but the idea of the Southern food is Harlem is, you know--

0:24:10.5

**NJD:** Yes, well it's so natural.

0:24:12.7

**TH:** Why is that?

0:24:14.0

**NJD:** Because Harlem is composed of people who come from the South. Or at least in the old days it was. Now you have a lot--now of course you have a lot of Latin people and a lot of Caribbean people, so Southern food is an anachronism for them. [*Laughs*]

0:24:29.6

**TH:** Well that's a good thing you said that because I've noticed--I've noticed the things on the menu like jerk chicken and rice and peas and--are those classic Southern?

0:24:36.3

**NJD:** No; that is--that's a bow to our Caribbean brothers and sisters who are now in--the great majority in Harlem; uh-hm.

0:24:46.4

**TH:** Okay; and so do you see it as a natural extension of the offering?

0:24:49.7

**NJD:** Yeah. Yes, I do see them as further South. [*Laughs*]

0:24:55.3

**TH:** Ah, interesting. I like that. Okay, much talk about Southern food is talk of continuity, of tradition. In this age such is such talk merely romantic or is it accurate?

0:25:10.5

**NJD:** It's accurate.

0:25:11.9

**TH:** Okay.

0:25:11.6

**NJD:** And romantic. [*Laughs*]

0:25:13.8

**TH:** All right, elaborate.

0:25:17.2

**NJD:** Well, of course the Southern tradition of hospitality lingers on, we hope. And that's something that fast-food doesn't give you. But that's a get-them-in-get-them-out mentality. So it's to linger over your food and to have nicer teas and to have condiments, like even if it's the celery and olives, which we couldn't stand but had nonetheless. *[Laughs]* That is a romantic notion. And also a real one in most Southern restaurants.

0:25:54.9

**TH:** And so, besides being of continuity and tradition, you feel it's a part of you that's a part of Southern food?

0:26:03.7

**NJD:** Yes.

0:26:07.3

**TH:** All right. So it's accurate and romantic. I like that. You're right. Okay. And this looks like the last question, but I think I have an aside question. Please--please describe a meal that you

would characterize as totemically Southern. I guess totemically meaning like classically or typically or--.

0:26:28.3

**NJD:** Well, we had figs in our back yard and we had pecans in our back yard. So pecan pie was a natural and fig preserves were natural. Also we grew tomatoes. We grew string beans in our back yard, so those things would have to come. And my Aunt Lizzy had a peach tree, so the things that are Southern to me are the things that we grew and had naturally. And I remember my aunt--my very, very refined aunt--had chicken, and she would take the chicken and wring its neck and then plunge it in hot water, and we would have to pluck its feathers out. **[Laughs]** So chicken on Sunday was a must. And then every so often the minister would come and have dinner with you, so she would have a peach cobbler or maybe we would have watermelon rind pickle, chicken in some form or fashion, either smothered or with dumplings or fried or baked or roasted with stuffing. And of course we had hot bread--either cornbread or homemade rolls with our peach preserves and corn--fried corn or corn pudding or corn in some fashion. And the vegetables that were fresh from her garden. And stewed tomatoes or fried tomatoes. That would be my most Southern-most meal. And then of course breakfast we had brains--scrambled brains. **[Laughs]**

0:28:08.2

**TH:** Because?

0:28:10.5

**NJD:** We thought it would give you greater mental powers. Or shad roe--some type of salt fish for breakfast and grits. Those would definitely be on the menu for breakfast.

0:28:24.8

**TH:** For a Sunday breakfast or any breakfast?

0:28:26.3

**NJD:** Grits--any breakfast. Grits, that was very typical. And then maybe some fried green tomatoes. That would be our very typical breakfast.

0:28:39.8

**TH:** And that's interesting you--you gave me an example of a dinner meal and a breakfast meal.

0:28:44.3

**NJD:** Breakfast, yes.



0:28:45.3

**TH:** What's the deal with the Southern lunch? Does that exist or is that not a big deal?

0:28:50.0

**NJD:** I didn't--we didn't do much with lunch.

0:28:52.6

**TH:** Really?

0:28:53.3

**NJD:** Yes, you had the big breakfast and a big dinner and then maybe we'd have a piece of watermelon or melon and--later. But we would have two big meals and then something small. But my aunt wasn't a big lunch person in the South. But in the North we always had a sandwich at lunch and some soup or something, but I don't remember much about lunch in the South. Just breakfast and dinner and then a little snack. Whereas in Newark, with my mother, we would have a small breakfast, small lunch, and a big dinner.

0:29:30.7

**TH:** And a big dinner?

0:29:31.9

**NJD:** Um-hmm.

0:29:32.4

**TH:** So that meal you described what does it--does it represent anything to you? Does it, you know--does each item individually stand for or represent something or together does it mean something?

0:29:42.6

**NJD:** Well, the grits was just mandatory and obligatory. Other things could change, maybe just bacon and eggs, but those grits were pretty much a staple; whereas in--in the North we might have oatmeal. I don't remember having oatmeal in the South.

0:29:58.4

**TH:** In the South, okay.

0:29:59.7

**NJD:** And we'd have Wheatina and we had Cream of Wheat in the North, but I don't remember having any kind of stuff like that--maybe a cold cereal.

0:30:11.5

*[Recording is paused, then resumed]*

**TH:** All right; a hot breakfast. Okay. Did ya'll get hungry throughout the day or not?

0:30:19.0

**NJD:** No.

0:30:19.4

**TH:** Or did you get good and hungry for--and ready for dinner?

0:30:22.5

**NJD:** Yeah, and we--we had a big leisurely breakfast.

0:30:25.2

**TH:** A leisurely breakfast?

0:30:27.2

**NJD:** Yeah.

0:30:27.6

**TH:** Wow. This was before school or before---?

0:30:29.0

**NJD:** No, I didn't go to school; this was the summer.

0:30:32.2

**TH:** Oh, the summer, right--right--right.

0:30:34.7

**NJD:** And we had the fresh peaches from the tree or the fresh figs. Lots of fresh fruit--  
cantaloupe.

0:30:42.8

**TH:** Cantaloupe from down there or no?

0:30:47.1

**NJD:** Uh-hm, yeah. Oh, yeah. They--they had all kinds of melons. [To a customer] Oh, you can have our chair. Thank you. [*Recording is paused, then resumes*] You can tell if black people cooked it or white people cooked it. [*Laughs*]

0:30:59.7

**TH:** Oh, really?

0:31:00.1

**NJD:** And that's true. I went to a white restaurant yesterday that doing Southern food and the collard greens are entirely different from the way we would cook them. And I don't know what the difference is but they're just seasoned differently and I can--I can tell. I don't know why.

0:31:18.1

**TH:** You don't know what it is?

0:31:18.2

**NJD:** Uh-um.

0:31:19.9

**TH:** Do you--*[Audio Skips]*

0:31:20.4

**NJD:** They use things from the can. Even in the South you find people that get a big number five [size] can, open it up, and then cook the meat and put the can [of greens] in it. People don't want to pluck their beans and go through all that. Now, that's a terrible shame. Or they'll get sweet potatoes and put water on them. Oh, what's happening with them? *[Audio Skips. Some dialogue is lost]* --these old classics and they really didn't know how. So it hit a nerve and it's the longest book—twenty-five years continuously in print, and that's an all-time record. [The interviewee is speaking of her own book, *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine.*]

0:32:02.5

**TH:** Wow.

0:32:04.9

**NJD:** Very few--.

0:32:06.1

**TH:** For any cookbook or any book that--?

0:32:06.8

**NJD:** For any book to be in print for twenty-five years is amazing.

0:32:11.1

**TH:** It's continuous. It's never been out of print?

0:32:14.0

**NJD:** Never been out of print in twenty-five years.

0:32:16.5

**TH:** Now do you have--have you—has it been changed or updated--?

0:32:19.3

**NJD:** Yes.

0:32:22.6

**[Audio cuts off prematurely. End Norma Jean Darden Interview]**