

Brandon Cook
Cook's Barbecue - Lexington, NC

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Interviewer: Rien T. Fertel
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[Begin Brandon Cook — Cook's Barbecue Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: Test, test; all right. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is the 17th of November, 2011, a beautiful day, after a few ugly days in Lexington, North Carolina. I am on the North Carolina BBQ Trail with Mr. Brandon Cook here at Cook's Barbecue and I'm going to have him introduce himself.

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Brandon Cook: How's everybody doing? This is Brandon Cook from Cook's Barbecue. We're still smoking here in Southmont [**Laughs**].

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RF: And what's your role here at—at Cook's Barbecue?

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BC: I'm pretty much the General Manager of the joint and the barbecue man.

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RF: Are you also the owner?

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BC: No, sir; I'm not. I just run it for the owner. It's a long-time family business, and we've been in it now for fifty years probably since about '69—1969.

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RF: So Cook's Barbecue was founded in 1969.

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BC: Uh-hm; yeah.

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RF: And who was it founded by?

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BC: My dad, Doug Cook.

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RF: Doug Cook; was he—tell me more about your dad. What—what—was he a professional barbecue man?

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BC: Well no; he was kind of a poor mountain man and moved down from Bryson City and Cherokee and didn't really have a whole lot going on up there. And he decided to venture down this way to see if he couldn't make some money doing something. And he worked for a rental—a horse-riding stable in the mountains and learned a lot about horses there, done a little bit of blacksmithing and when he come to Lexington he got a job as a welder. He worked for Duracell

and Mallory Battery for a while as a welder. And done his horseshoeing also, and then he wound up hopping curb for Wayne Monk. And Wayne Monk is the one that taught him the barbecue business.

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He decided one day to—and it was around this time of the year, Thanksgiving or so, and he had some people wanting to cook some meat for them out here in the yard on his grill. And he did so, and it just so happened that the Health Inspector heard about it, and the Health Inspector rode by and seen that he was out here cooking meat, you know for sale without any kind of cleaners or anything like that going on in the—in the building. So they told him that he was going to have to build him something, you know, that would be sanitized and meet sanitary standards to put out his product with. And that's when he built this little kitchen, this building here.

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RF: All right; I want to ask about where we are. Are we officially in—what is the mailing address? Are we in Lexington or Cotton Grove?

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BC: We're just right outside of Lexington. We're south of Lexington in Southmont.

00:02:53

RF: Okay; and why did your father, Doug Cook, right, why did he choose this location?

00:03:01

BC: I'm not sure really except for just it looked like it had a future as far as you know business and it was industry and all that good stuff. And the furniture factories used to be really kicking it around town and that just created a lot of business. And he was looking for a business he could get into that one day he could turn over to somebody else and him go on and it still make him money. And he said welding he just really couldn't—he couldn't turn that over to anybody, so he decided to further this business.

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But at one time whenever this place was just built it was only this kitchen right here. There was a window right here at the door and there was no dining room. You'd pull up; Dad was the only one that worked in here. And you pulled up to the door right here and he'd come to the window and ask you what you wanted, you know, and it was just a chopped sandwich, chopped plate, just the bare essentials in here. He had a fryer, and he cooked his hushpuppies and French fries in that fryer and made slaw and had a flat grill he would cook hamburgers on.

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And it got busier and busier, so he set up a sawmill, and he cut him some wood and he built the little dining room. It got, once again busier and busier and busier, so he repeated the process and cut more wood with his sawmill and then built the back dining room. And we've been at it since, like I said, 1969 is when the kitchen first started here and then the big dining room was added probably in 1980.

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RF: So he—he hand-built this restaurant that we're in?

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BC: Yeah; yeah.

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RF: And is the wood from—we're kind of surrounded by woodland.

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BC: Oh yeah. Yeah; the wood—all the wood that the building is built off of is off the property.

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RF: And how old was he, when he—when he started here at Cook's Barbecue?

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BC: Probably about thirty.

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RF: And how old was he—or how old was he and how long was he at Wayne Monk's Lexington Barbecue?

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BC: I'm not exactly sure on—on his period with Wayne. I think it was only for a couple of years though; it wasn't very long.

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RF: You said he hopped curb at Lexington Barbecue. What is that exactly?

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BC: When you pull up to the place and you beep your horn and somebody comes to get your order, and then you go get the order from the window and you carry it to the car. That's curb-hopping.

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RF: And did your father also work in the kitchen there?

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BC: Yeah; he worked in the kitchen some and learned how to cook barbecue that style, you know from Wayne Monk.

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RF: So when—when growing up here, where did your family live in the area?

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BC: Right across the road; there's a sidewalk from Dad's house and mom's house over here, and Dad used to get up—I remember when I was a kid, I'd watch him get ready in the morning, you know. It would be about five o'clock in the morning and he'd walk the sidewalk over here and start the fire, start the barbecue and he would cook and have the shoulders done. At two we

closed down. That's why we have hours kind of like we do; you know, we close at two. But he'd go home and take a nap, come back and then work the night shift. And then a couple of my cousins worked in here with him and whenever Dad got tired or couldn't handle it no more he left it for them to finish up, and then they would close the joint. And then he'd be back over here 5:30 the next morning.

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RF: And let me ask; what is your birth date? When were you born?

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BC: I was born in September of '70.

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RF: And what—what's the exact day?

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BC: Nineteenth.

00:06:42

RF: September 19, 1970; so you were born the year after he opened this place?

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BC: Yeah; yeah. I got an older brother. He is two and a half years older than I but we both kind of grew up right here. A lot of people pick on me and say I was born in that pit over there.

[Laughs] But this has always been the family business. You know, my mother, she's always worked here. But she's in bad health now. She's in a rest home in Denton, the next little town we got here beside of us but it's always been a family restaurant.

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And now our second cousin, Don Payne owns it.

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RF: Tell me about Mr. Payne. Oh yeah; we can—let me ask about your earliest—let me ask you this. I want to ask you this before you brought up Don Payne and we can get back to that. What are your earliest—if you were born here almost right when the restaurant happened, when your dad started making barbecue what are your earliest memories from those times?

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BC: Oh, my earliest memories, we used to just come over here. I mean, we used to come over here and break in the place and the door would be open, you know just for the fun of it, crawling through the wood box. There's a wood box back here that feeds the—there's a fireplace in the big dining room and there's an access hole that leads through the wall. And yeah; we used to come over here and fart around and climb through it and break in, even though it was open.

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I remember a couple snowy occasions. My friends all coming here to meet you know because we weren't going to school that day, and we all kind of hung out here with Dad, you know, all day and cooked barbecue with him. **[Laughs]**

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RF: And were you—did he—at what point did your father really let you work here?

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BC: Man, as soon as I was tall enough to clean tables; I was probably nine—ten years old.

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RF: Did you work the front and the back?

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BC: Well yeah; in this business you kind of have to do that. If the front gets busy you have to you know run and help them and vice-versa.

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RF: And did he teach you how to barbecue?

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BC: Oh yeah; oh yeah. That and I just had enough sense to figure it out as he was going, you know. But he told me lots of pointers, and I guess that's one thing about growing up here and living right next door. When I'd get off school you know from the school bus I'd come down here and because I always liked flirting with the waitresses, always being good-looking waitresses around. **[Laughs]** And I always liked coming in here and flirting with the waitresses and stuff and seeing everybody. But it was always something going on. If you couldn't get into something as a kid here then I'd go to the house and get into something. But he's always had horses and there used to be a barn out back. I mean even now I remember a hitching post used to

be out here and a couple of our neighbors they always rode their horses down here. Every day they rode their horses down here and tied them up to the old hitching post.

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And, like I said, Dad, he's always been a horseman and going around and putting shoes on—I was going to say shod, but people think shod—. You know, not—not shod—shod, you put shoes on their feet. And we met a lot of people and you know anybody that comes in here, and I see their face, I'm going to give them return business. I'm not a—I don't go to Lowe's and buy their you know big store stuff or try to stay out of Wal-Mart. I do not do that. If there's any small business around here that does business with us I return the favor.

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RF: Tell me a bit more about your father. What kind of teacher of barbecue was he?

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BC: Oh, he was a really good one. He was very firm. He wanted to make sure everything was always done right and that's the reason why I'm like I am now. But I couldn't do any of this had I not been shown the right way, you know.

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RF: Did you also eat at home? Did your mom or dad cook at home or was it only eating here?

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BC: No; my mom, she used to make five or six-course meal, probably homemade biscuits, sweet tea, dessert every day—every day. And I remember, you know, a couple times whenever I

was growing up over here—I remember one particular occasion the power went out. You know, we had a bad—I think it was an ice storm, and the power went out for a couple of weeks. And we had gas over here in the fireplaces. So, we just wound up living over here for about a week, you know, 'til they wound up finally getting the power back on. Everything over here at the house was electric heat—you know, electric stove, and electric range. Here everything run off gas, so even if the power is out you can still cook. And that's one reason why I like this setup now. If the power goes out you can continue cooking.

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RF: Do people still keep coming when the power is out?

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BC: Man, I'll tell you what; we don't ever have a snowy day that you can sit at home and watch it snow because people are always here. And with me living—I live within 213-foot if you Google it from this place and as long as it don't snow deep **[Laughs]** I'll be here.

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RF: And tell me exactly how long you've been managing Cook's Barbecue.

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BC: Well I've been at it now for probably—I strayed out for a little while and done some construction. I was looking to pursue maybe a contractor's license at one point. And I kind of

juggled that for—well about ten years. And I was getting ready to go get my contractor's license and that's when the bottom of the housing market fell out.

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And I also worked here part-time on the weekends and so whenever the housing market fell out I just decided to do this full-time.

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RF: And when—when was that?

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BC: I've been here for eleven years now doing this for—for Don.

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RF: And I should say we're standing—

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BC: February of '01.

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RF: February '01, okay; I should say we're standing in the pit room because you got to watch the pits. Tell me about this—this room that we're in.

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BC: Well it's—it's like I said, it's been here since 1969. It's kind of converted now. It used to be the only and the primary kitchen that we had here. But now we kind of got it converted half into a pit room and the other half is the new waitress station. We've kept all the old building—or all the old fireplaces and all the old dining rooms and all the old look. We just built a new kitchen and we have new modern equipment so we can put out. We do a lot of bulk orders and catering jobs, such as we had to put out 150-pounds of barbecue that went over to the furniture market. It was in this past—well about a month ago it was in. And we do a lot of bulk orders and stuff like that. So we had to build this modern kitchen. But other than that it's pretty much been the same since then.

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RF: And tell me how many pits there are here.

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BC: There's only two.

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RF: What do they hold?

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BC: We—most of the time I do shoulders and beef brisket and turkey on one and I do chicken and ribs on another.

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RF: And how many shoulders can you fit?

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BC: Well, I can fit about twenty-five on it if I really squeeze them together. I don't like having to do that. Most of the time I cook about eighteen—fifteen or eighteen just depending on the need and what kind of business we got, what kind of business forecast, like in the summertime we're really busy and you have to really put off a lot of barbecue, put out a lot of barbecue. But and then come about this time of year we slow down quite a bit, but come Christmastime we do a shoulder box which is a whole shoulder, a quart of dip, a quart of slaw, and a dozen rolls in a Cook's barbecue box. And we done about 250 last year. So I got a lot of cooking coming up.

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RF: And you just said how busy it is during the summer. Why is that?

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BC: Well because we're right here at High Rock Lake. We're kind on the peninsula here and the lake is all around us. We have our regular people that keeps us going through the wintertime, you know, and but come summertime, I don't know why; it's just triple busy.

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RF: And let me ask about the—I have some more questions about the pit. What kind of wood do you use?

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BC: Basically hickory. We have a little oak mixed in with it but we like to use just hickory.

Hickory is the best thing you can cook with.

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RF: And you were telling me where this hickory comes from.

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BC: Yeah; it comes from Bobby Garrison, Bobby Garrison and his wife. They're a couple here in Lexington and they're probably seventy years old. And she outworks him [*Laughs*].

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RF: So tell me the process when you have to fire up the pit in the morning? How does that go? What time does it start and what kind of—half hour by half hour?

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BC: Well, generally I get over her about six in the morning and the first thing I do is run a pot of coffee and then turn the news on up here. We got a TV in the kitchen. I'm cheating; I'm sorry y'all. But yeah; we got a TV in the kitchen so we can keep up with current affairs. But I usually start with a pot of coffee and then I come down here in the pit room and start the fire, build it as big as I can. Sometimes my deer hunter buddy in the backyard back here has killed one and I have to run back there and help him drag it in.

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RF: Well let me stop you. He's killed a deer like right outside the door?

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BC: Yeah; here in the backyard. Yeah; we got some crazy neighbors. But I come in and—and then I have to—I have to clear anything that's—that's left over on the pit here and clear the—get a wire brush and clear the grills off good. And then I start with a big old hand-truck full of shoulders. Wheel them down here out of the walk-in coolers and of course I got my coffee going by then. And I light the fire. I start the pit. And like I said, usually it takes about—you watch the clock and you fire it which is shovel coals up under the pit for about every twenty minutes for about four and a half—five hours just depending on the size of the shoulders and the—if you have oak wood it don't seem to cook as hot as the hickory does. You might have to prolong that out another, you know—fire it about every fifteen minutes instead of every twenty. But most of the time I flip shoulders over after about five hours of cooking on their face side and then I put them on the skin side and you cook them most of the time ten, eleven—I've been in here over thirteen hours before trying to get shoulders done.

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They used to come small, but now hormones, steroids, and everything, they're trying to get them to grow faster and they're a lot bigger. The shoulders are bigger, which that's fine because once you chop them up, instead of getting five pounds of barbecue off one you'll get eight, you know. So that'll work.

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RF: When did that start happening—what year when the change—?

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BC: Well, I'd say real slow over a period of probably ten years or so, since I've been here. I usually—whenever I call the order in and I order shoulders I put a note on there, you know, make sure my cases don't weigh over fifty-five pounds. But it seems like they forget that sometimes and that's just—you have to deal with whatever you're dealt.

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RF: So, how much does a shoulder weigh when you put it on the—?

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BC: Some of them weigh up to probably fifteen pounds or more green, uncooked.

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RF: How much—what's the loss?

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BC: I'd say probably two or three, maybe four pounds on a shoulder like that. And it all depends on who is cooking. If—if you burn the outside of it or if you burn skin on it or anything like that then you have to wind up throwing that away, so that's lost too.

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RF: And you just said that a shoulder would sometimes take twelve or thirteen hours. Why is that?

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BC: Well, like I said, whenever you—the depth and the ashes in the pit here it has a lot to do with it. When your ashes get really built up from cooking a while, you have to fire it even—even less because it's closer to the meat and puts off more heat and you don't want to set it on fire.

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But if you're—like I started out on one cord of wood and it was hickory, and I was real busy up here in the kitchen trying to do some other things and then I got it on some oak wood and I was firing it at the same time I had been all day. Well when I opened it up and looked, the oak looked like I hadn't even been doing anything [*Laughs*], because that oak just cooks a lot cooler than the hickory does.

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RF: And you—how can you tell? Do they look different in the pit underneath?

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BC: What's that the shoulders?

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RF: Well the coals or—?

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BC: Yeah; you can tell. The hickory it'll—it—whenever you temp it down you have to knock the coals apart like that so it's less apt to catch on fire. And when you temp them down the hickory will be little bitty cherry—I mean cherry-red coals. But if you throw them out here on the floor they'll hold their cherry-red, you know heat for a lot longer than an oak one will.

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RF: And tell me about how you—how you shovel the coals. Is there a technique?

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BC: Well yeah; you try not to get—you try to get as less ash as you possibly can, and I'm left-handed and I try to—and it seems like I cook the right-side of the pit harder than I do the left, just naturally. So I try to put the smaller shoulders on, you know, the cooler side and the bigger shoulders on the hotter side. And it don't matter how good you shovel the coals in there, this heat don't—it don't radiate. It goes straight up. If you don't have the coals straight under it, it's not going to cook. So you have no choice but to rotate; you know, take the ones out of the corner and put in the middle, the ones in the middle in the corner.

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RF: And tell me; do you just toss the coals in there? Do you scatter them? What goes on?

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BC: Well—

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RF: And if you have to do this, I know we've been twenty minutes—.

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BC: —some people—

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RF: So if you have to—.

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BC: —some people are slingers or some people are wigglers. They—they kind of wiggle it up under there you know with the shovel and make it fall, but I'm a slinger. I like to sling in the corner.

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RF: All right; let's talk about the shoulders. Do you season them or salt them before?

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BC: Yeah; I give them a little bit of salt on both sides before I start.

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RF: Okay.

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BC: The beef brisket, I give them salt, pepper, and garlic and rub it in real good. The more you—the more seasoning on the beef the better, but shoulders is just a little bit of salt. It used to be more but everybody is trying to be healthier nowadays, so I try to back off of the salt.

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RF: Have you seen people's barbecue diets change?

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BC: Yeah; yeah I've seen a lot of people trying to eat healthier nowadays you know no fat in it and whatnot. There's part of the shoulder that's white lean and a lot of people like that because it don't have a whole lot of fat on it. And I don't think it's got the flavor but, you know—. It all depends on your taste and—and what you think is good as far as good barbecue.

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RF: And you mentioned brisket. When did—how did that come about because that's rare in these parts?

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BC: Well, I know whenever mom and Dad got divorced in probably '82 and that's when Dad sold this place to our cousin, Don Payne. And that's when he went to Texas and learned how to cook it there Texas-style. And it's funny; you can pull a brisket off and if it's got color to it still it don't look—it's not done. You got to just blacken them up, boy; the blacker the better.

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RF: And how do they sell? How do people in North Carolina take to brisket?

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BC: To be honest with you if you run out of something every once in a while and—and say look; you ought to try this. You know, we're out of that. But try this out, and I guarantee you'll like it. That's how I do it most of the time. It never fails. When we run out of something people are like, "Man I wish I had tried that a long time ago. You know, that's good stuff."

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RF: There's also a turkey on the grill, on the grill—on the pit right now I should say. Tell me about that.

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BC: Well, at one time probably six years ago we offered this turkey and it was only for Thanksgiving. And it—man it was so good; we'd smoke it up and—for a couple hours and get it good and hot and smoke it up. And, I mean, it's just got the flavor pouring out of it. And people liked it so good they wanted it here on the menu. And because about like I was telling you, we have a shoulder box, you know, we also do the turkey like that. We'll be doing a lot of those this Thanksgiving or next week because it's slipping up on us.

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My sister got married this past weekend and that's all I've had my brain on. I hadn't even been thinking about Thanksgiving yet. But that turkey we sell it by the tray. We sell it by you

know you can get a barbecue salad, you can get a beef salad, you can get a turkey salad. You can get a chopped tray; you know, or coarse chopped or sliced turkey tray, plate or sandwich.

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RF: Tell me all the different ways you can order a barbecue.

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BC: Man, there's a bunch. [*Laughs*] My favorite one is—"Let me get some of that barbecue with some ash on it." That means the brown. Yeah; there's brown barbecue. And that's the good salty flavored and like I said, there's the white lean. That's the part that's inside the shoulder that it don't have all the fat on it and a lot of people think it's a lot more healthy for them, which I guess in a way it is. But it's just—it's a lot harder to get to. You have to really tear a shoulder down to get to it. But it comes sliced, coarse chopped, and chopped.

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RF: And what's the most popular?

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BC: Most of the time I'd say chopped.

00:24:44

RF: And how do you eat your barbecue?

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BC: Man, every day. *[Laughs]* I eat mine chopped most of the time and sliced. It all depends. Most of the time I nibble; if I got the turkey out on the block and we cut some up I'll nibble me a piece or if I got some chicken up there I'll nibble on the chicken. Or the barbecue, I'll—if I'm chopping up the shoulder, you know, I'll eat some barbecue off of it or—don't get me in trouble, or the beef brisket the same deal.

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RF: Do you taste barbecue while it's on the pit, while it's cooking?

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BC: Yeah; yeah. You don't want to eat it raw though. I remember one time we were at a family reunion. Dad had him a little portable cooker that he pulled along behind him, you know. And like I said, he's from Bryson City up in Cherokee—

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RF: Where is that exactly?

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BC: That's up near Asheville, up in the mountains. He's about a mile away from the Great Smokey Mountains National Park is where he grew up at—him and the owner of this place now, Don Payne.

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But whenever we'd go up there for a family reunion he'd always take the shoulders, you know, and the cooker. And we'd get up there and everybody would get to cooking and eating and

whatnot and it was real good. But I remember one time I was hungry, boy, and I got to eating before that stuff was done, shew; I wound up just as sick as a dog. Now I puked all over the place. *[Laughs]*

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RF: You had some raw barbecue?

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BC: Yeah; yeah I ate it before it was done. That's taught—

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RF: You were telling—

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BC: —me a lesson on that one.

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RF: —you were telling me a little while ago how you know it's done. Can you tell me that again?

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BC: Well once you—once you cook it and handle as many shoulders as we do around here in these parts, if—if a shoulder is real limber feeling or you see the—the meat pulling away from the bone and you—that's a good indication. You can also, whenever you pick it up if it's kind of falling apart you know it's good and done. But if it's rubbery feeling, you know, then it's not

done. But I—I try not to cook it overdone. We have to have a—the way we used to do it was I cooked this today and let it drain on the pit overnight, and then tomorrow or tonight they'd use this and then tomorrow morning it would be fired up, heated up again and chop it up while you're cooking more.

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But now the inspectors don't want you leaving any kind of meat, you know, out for any kind of amount of time. Once this gets done you got to start the cool-down transition point on it. And it's not really as good as just fresh off the pit, you know, because any time you refrigerate barbecue it gives it a little flavor, you know, a little taste to it. It's nothing funky or anything like that but it's just not quite as good as it—what we used to do as far as leaving it on the pit and draining it. But if worse comes to worse I got my thermostat; you know and I always stick it with a thermostat right in the thickest part of the shoulder. And that'll tell you.

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RF: Does barbecue taste the same as it did when you were growing up?

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BC: As far as I can remember, yeah; yeah.

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RF: It's the same?

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BC: Yeah; there's one—one bad thing I've got is allergy problems and sinuses, man. I can't hardly breathe most of the time and I don't know. It's hard to taste stuff, you know.

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RF: So, tell me; you—did you ever think—I mean you grew up in this restaurant that we're in now. Did you—do you have to check the pit?

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BC: Yeah.

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RF: Okay; can we keep talking?

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BC: Yeah.

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RF: Okay; so you grew up in this restaurant. Did you ever think that you'd be manning the pits for so long?

00:28:30

BC: I hoped not, but yes; I did. [*Laughs*] Now we—it's always been here; you know it's a family thing. Like I said, Dad—Dad said a long time ago, "There's one thing people are always going to have to do and that's eat, and that's three times a day most of them." So there's always

going to be a future in this kind of business. And at one time I really didn't want to believe that, but it is so. Like I said, at one point we built houses, \$250,000 houses, 10-foot away from each other back to back to back, and now you won't build one in a year, you know. So when the economy changes I guess the strong people has got to change with it.

00:29:21

RF: Did your father encourage you to take over here?

00:29:26

BC: Uh, not really and that's probably why I did because he—he really didn't push me into this direction, no. But I've always been proud of what he's done and—and I try to keep up with him. It's the family name in a good way, positive way.

00:29:42

RF: And he has his own place. Can you tell me about that?

00:29:45

BC: Yeah; he's—he's got Backcountry Barbecue in Linwood, North Carolina which is about like Denton where my mom is at in—in the rest home, the next little town up, over here. He started it in '85, December of '85. And he does a lot of barbecue; he does chicken every day. And he's got a good steak selection over there. He cuts his own steaks and makes his own hamburger meat, you know grinds up all his hamburger meat and—and makes patties and everything, makes his own chili. I mean he really puts a personal touch on it.

00:30:21

And he's got a hybrid cooker.

00:30:26

RF: What is that? Tell me about that.

00:30:27

BC: It's the bad point about these is like I said—when you shovel coals in there it'll only be hot for another ten minutes. And you got to keep on with more. Well he's got electric coals inside of his pits and it keeps it at a steady temperature. But you still have the doors on the bottom like this and you build a fire and you shovel coals in it and that gives it the wood flavor. And you can produce almost as good as what we got here in about half the time, with about half the wood also.

00:31:01

RF: Who makes that electric cooker?

00:31:02

BC: He does. He does; he's the one that built and designed them. They're patented, got the NSF, National Sanitary Foundation, sticker and all that on them.

00:31:12

RF: Does he sell them to other establishments?

00:31:14

BC: Yeah; yeah he's got some for sale too if anybody wants one and right now he's working on a homeowner edition. He—he moved to Pagosa Springs, Colorado. He's been out there for a while now and my stepmom, she's in the real estate out there and Dad started a restaurant out there, but it was in like a—I don't know, a shopping center. And with the smoke flying through there, the people out there didn't like it. You know, you can't be smoking so he was saying that he was going to have to do something about it. And he was trying to come up with an easier way, you know, to keep his barbecue cooking without all the smoke rolling around and everybody griping about it.

00:31:59

But it was so funny; my other brother, Cole, he was having to truck wood from here because they don't have wood out there like we have here. They've only got pine and stuff like that, and mesquite. Out here you know we've got the hardwood, especially hickory, and that's—hickory is your main thing of cooking. But whenever Dad went out to Colorado he was trying to cook in a different altitude. He just didn't—it wasn't nowhere near the same.

00:32:27

RF: Was he doing Lexington style barbecue?

00:32:29

BC: Yeah; yeah.

00:32:32

RF: So your brother would actually truck wood out—?

00:32:35

BC: Probably every three months he'd have to take a big—this dump truck just as full of hickory wood as he could get and go out there. And it's about thirty—thirty hours away.

00:32:45

RF: And what was the name of this establishment?

00:32:48

BC: I'm not sure what he called it to be honest with you, and I'm almost embarrassed on that one. *[Laughs]*

00:32:52

RF: What's the difference between real old-school pit-cooking and electric cooking?

00:33:00

BC: Wow; man, there's all kinds of differences. Whenever—I know I've gotten in a jam here before and had to borrow a shoulder from my buddies up here at the next place up the road and they had—they use their electric cooker, or Barbecue King, and it puts out, you know, decent stuff and—and I think it's funny because some people actually like it you know. And it all depends on your taste. If you think that stuff is good, you know, then it's good to you. But if you

know better and you've been other places and ate different ways most time if you've been around and—and sampled it you'll know what the good stuff is and whatnot.

00:33:39

But electric cooking, I don't know; it just leaves your shoulder really greasy for some reason. It seemed like I wound up throwing away the majority of that shoulder I had borrowed simply because it just didn't look like it was good and done and I don't know—kind of greasy like. But as far as the pits that Dad has got, now that's the way to go. Yeah; that's the way to go because you still are doing this. He's took everything that's hard about this and tried to make it easy. That's just like having to open these up and they're all smoky you know. You got to jump in there and wiggle the back row of shoulders around and smoke and all that stuff is pouring up on you. Well on his, you open the door on the front and pull the whole rack out to you. There's a pan on the floor you catch with your foot and pull out and it catches all the grease that drips down. You flip all the stuff around and push it back in there, close the door down, push that pan back, and then you open the door and fire it. And he's got a buzzer that goes off every forty minutes and it tells you that's when it's time to fire the pit.

00:34:44

Now you can stand there and let it cook with the electric coals by their self, but you—that's not the way to get it done good. You—you got to have both parts of it operating.

00:34:55

RF: Is it important that you and Cook's Barbecue still do it this way?

00:34:59

BC: Yeah; yeah. I—I considered putting some of his pits in here before. And if—if we got really busy again I'd probably—I might, you know, consider it again. But right now with the economy the way it is, it—it's slowed everybody down. So as long as I can put out with this I'm going to.

00:35:21

RF: Do—before we started recording you were telling me about a recent fire experience. Can you retell that story?

00:35:32

BC: [*Laughs*] Well about a—every place I believe in Lexington, or anybody that cooks this way, has had fires as far as in the pit and everything. And it's just—it's real simple to do when—when you're dealing with this raw wood like we are. There's cardboard you know in the pit covering up the meat that holds the heat and smoke down on it. If you fire it too hard that'll catch on fire. And once you—every time you shovel coals into these pits that's a million different little opportunities for it to catch on fire.

00:36:06

And it starts as a little bitty flicker in the bottom of the pit, and if you take your shovel and open the door and temp it out you're good to go. But if smoke starts rolling out of this thing and a waitress hollers, you got a pit fire, it's too late.

00:36:21

RF: And what happens? What do you do?

00:36:22

BC: Well, you bring the wheelbarrow in here and you shovel all your meat in the wheelbarrow and take it to the dumpster. *[Laughs]*

00:36:29

RF: So does the fire ever leave the pit?

00:36:33

BC: No; no, it don't. It don't leave the building uh-uh, or the pits, uh-uh. And that's one reason why we got the metal and all the stuff here up on the roof and we're kind of surrounded in here and I fireproofed it about every way I possibly can. I'm amazed around back every time I dig coals out of here they fall out on the other side in the wood shed and there's all kinds of bark you know back there and kindling that's dried up but—it'll smolder but it won't ever just catch on fire.

00:37:05

RF: Do you have to call the Fire Department?

00:37:07

BC: Hopefully not. *[Laughs]*

00:37:10

RF: You've—

00:37:13

BC: Yeah; you don't want to call the Fire Department.

00:37:14

RF: So you just take a fire extinguisher to it yourself?

00:37:16

BC: Yeah; well I got a water hose here and—and most of the time it—it don't get that bad. You know, like I said, we've—we were here in the summertime and on Friday night we had a wheel full of orders going. The window which is the tray—or table up here where we put food out is what we call the window, because it used to be down here and it really was a window then.

00:37:40

But we had the building full of people and I was trying to run around and do 100 different things at one time and the pit wound up catching on fire. And I mean it emptied this place out.

[Laughs] We wound up having to give the firemen all the food that we had fixed already. And the inspector made us—we had to have another inspection to reopen on the—on the next day.

When most of the time pit fires happen all the time; like I said it's just disheartening to the pit master whenever that happens. And you have to throw it away and start again.

00:38:14

RF: And why did it empty the place out? Was there smoke in the dining room or—?

00:38:17

BC: Yeah; yeah smoke got out in the dining room and somebody hollered, "Fire," yeah.

00:38:22

RF: So it was kind of—

00:38:22

BC: Hearing that word; that's a bad word around here. I don't even like to hear them holler it.

00:38:27

RF: What do people do when they hear the word fire?

00:38:29

BC: They freak out. Yeah; they freak out.

00:38:33

RF: I want to ask you about the cardboard which you just mentioned and I should say in the next room over, there's a stack of cardboard that's taller than me. What does that do? What does the cardboard do exactly?

00:38:43

BC: Well you—whenever you put your meat in here in the pit on the grill, you cover it up with cardboard and that keeps the heat and the smoke down on the meat. If not, it would let too much, you know, escape and it would take you twice as long to get stuff cooked. But you don't want to cook it too hot; if you do you'll set the cardboard on fire. I've seen a bunch of people run out of here with cardboard on fire. *[Laughs]*

00:39:14

RF: And is it a special type of cardboard, a special insulated type?

00:39:18

BC: Yeah; you want double-all. *[Laughs]*

00:39:25

RF: Okay; we're back. We had to take a small break to take care of some business and get a good tour of the kitchen. You were just telling me about the neighborhood and the people who drive around here. Tell me about your customer base. Who are they? Who eats here?

00:39:37

BC: Well, we got a little bit of everybody believe it or not and that's because we give away free dessert on Wednesday. *[Laughs]* But no; we have a—people of all different ages and I'm amazed at some of the younger people that enjoy the barbecue and—and still come out and get it. A lot of the older people I guess have—I don't know served it maybe at their dinner tables here and there

and everybody has kind of grown accustomed to it. But it's funny; I have immediate neighbors here and as soon as I start this fire in the morning and smoke goes up through there and they're like [*Sniffing*]—. Got a buddy that runs a garage right here at the end of the field from us and he's always the first customer every morning. He's, "Man what you cooking down there? It's smelling good, boy."

00:40:22

But that's why our little slogan is *still smoking* because we still do that with that.

00:40:28

RF: We're at the end of a cul-de-sac like at the end of a road. How do people find you for the first time because it's impossible to drive by?

00:40:34

BC: Well yeah; it's very easy to drive right by and a lot of people I think they—it's kind of like a scavenger hunt. They want to get out and try to find us because I tell people all the time. They'll call and ask for directions. And I said, "Well, I don't think you can find us." "Oh yeah; I can find you. I'll be there. I can find you." And most of them do. And thank goodness for GPSs nowadays.

00:40:55

We used to have a sign up here on Highway 8 whenever you first turned on—off of Rock Crusher—or turn onto Rock Crusher Road but whenever the State come through and—and widened the road it kind of took our sign out. And we hadn't put one back up—not visibly good anyway. And—and we have a lot of word of mouth. That—word of mouth travels fast.

00:41:20

RF: What's the most difficult part about running a restaurant and a barbecue restaurant at that?

00:41:25

BC: Keeping everybody happy—all the drama. *[Laughs]* A lot of hours, a lot of hard work, but I guess it's good if—if I was I don't know, rich in some way and didn't have to work I probably wouldn't like it, you know. I feel like if—if you find a job at what you like doing and you can convert what you like doing into a job and halfway like, it you're doing good.

00:41:51

I used to judge—say this on boats and cars and houses you got, but really if you can get out of—out of bed every day and not just really hate to come to work, then you're doing good. That's successful to me.

00:42:04

RF: That's great. Would you encourage your children or young people to go into this business? And by this business let's specify the pit-cooked barbecue.

00:42:15

BC: Well, like I said, it—it is a lot of hard work. And if anybody wanted—if anybody wanted to learn how to do it they could. If you got the will and the want to, then you can do it; anybody can do anything but I always say, education is—you have to have an education. I'd say for anybody, go to school first and then come out and do this.

00:42:36

RF: Do you get to try other barbecue in the area?

00:42:39

BC: Well, believe it or not, I'm related to half of the people around here that run the barbecue places, so yeah, I eat a bunch of it. That's just like my sister got married last weekend and my— Backcountry is the one that catered it and I wound up eating their barbecue. And I was telling Dad, "Well, y'all don't have good—bad barbecue over there, you know." *[Laughs]*

00:43:00

RF: So, and you're related to more than just your father's place?

00:43:03

BC: Well my brother-in-law and sister-in-law they run Smiley's Barbecue up on 52 right by Hayes Jewelers and it's been up there forever and a day. And at one point I worked for them just real briefly before I come down here and started doing this job. But yeah; I—I get to venture out and eat a little bit of different places. When I went to school there was probably four or five people that I had—as a matter of fact, I even had homeroom with one of them, and their parents all owned barbecue places. There was Troutman's Barbecue in Denton; there was this place here, Speedy Lohr's down in Southmont and now with the State—when they come and done the road, they took out Speedy's old building. But yeah; I've—I've been around a bunch and my cousin, he runs a place up on [Highway] 52 also. It's called Rick's Smokehouse. He used to work here for Dad back in '69 or '70, whenever it was first started.

00:44:06

RF: So you seem to know a lot of barbecue people and grew up with them and are related to them. Why is there so much barbecue here in the Lexington, North Carolina area?

00:44:15

BC: You know, I've wondered that myself several times. I just don't—I don't have a good answer for that one. I don't know. I guess the wood is plentiful and maybe it's just the good location to cook. Maybe—the EPA wasn't then as hard as they are on you now as far as putting smoke and stuff into the air. But I guess it's just a good county to cook in.

00:44:37

RF: Do you think—we talked about a few changes, changes in the meat, changes in the way you know y'all cook from pit smoke to electric, do you see more changes coming in the near future?

00:44:49

BC: Well, the changes I've seen so far has been everybody going you know to electric instead of staying with this. And that's a change I hope I don't see. I hope everybody stays with this old-style. That would be really good.

00:45:03

RF: Do you think there will still be pit-cooked barbecue ten, twenty, thirty years from now?

00:45:08

BC: Oh yeah; oh yeah. There's such a demand for it. We ship it all over; you know, we have people call and want us to chop it up and freeze it and take it to the FedEx store and ship it all over. They're—oh yeah; there's—there's such a demand for it I don't think it'll ever just totally go away.

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RF: And how long do you plan on doing this?

00:45:28

BC: I plan on doing this for a while I guess. I've been doing it for a while and yeah; I'm going to keep on kicking at it I reckon.

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RF: It—I want to thank you for—for talking. Do you have any final comments?

00:45:39

BC: No; I don't reckon I do except I'm hungry after looking at all this food.

00:45:42

RF: I'm hungry, too. All right; well I want to thank you. This was really informative and really great.

00:45:48

BC: Thank you; and I bet you learned something.

00:45:48

RF: I congratulate you. All right; thank you.

00:45:52

BC: And I'm glad everybody come down and took the time to check us all out.

00:45:56

[End Brandon Cook-Cook's Barbecue Interview]