JOHN VERGOS
Charlie Vergo's Rendezvous – Memphis, TN

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Location: Charlie Vergo's Rendezvous - Memphis, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin John Vergos-Rendezvous Interview]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: Okay; this is Rien Fertel of the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, July 2, 2008. I am at the Rendezvous with Mr. John Vergos. Please introduce yourself, your name and birth date, please.

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John Vergos: John Vergos; I was born April 11, 1948.

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RF: Okay; now let's—let's start with—well what is your title here at the restaurant?

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JV: Well we really don't have titles. I'm one of the owners. My father started it and my brother, sister, and I run it now.

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RF: Okay; well let's get into a bit of history. As I understand you were born in Memphis—here in Memphis.

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JV: I'm a native Memphian and I went away to college at SMU for four years and then I went to—graduated from University of Memphis Law School and practiced for 14 years and then I

came back in the business. But I've been working in and out of the business since I was old enough to—to wash dishes and bus tables.

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RF: Okay; so you—you grew up in this restaurant and you come from a restaurant family and I believe if—I know a bit of the history; I know a small bit. I want to learn more. You come from a long or—a long lineage of restaurateurs or restaurant entrepreneurs. Can you talk a bit about that where it started?

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JV: Well we're—we're Greek and so you know all the Greeks naturally evolve in the restaurant business. My grandfather came over in the early 1900s and he actually had the first hotdog stand—foot-long hotdog stand on Beale Street and he owned a diner called the Jackson Coffee Shop which is where St. Jude Hospital is now and my father grew up in that business. My—my—on my mother's side, her parents started a restaurant called Jim's Place which is—continues to operate. It started—it was across the street from the Peabody Hotel and it started in 1921. So we've all—and then I have an uncle in the restaurant business, so we've all you know—our whole family is kind of what we—what we've done. And so that—that—next question or I can—.

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RF: Sure; let's—let's get your—your parents' names first just to—.

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JV: My father is Charlie Vergos, Charlie J. Vergos and he was—he was actually born in the United States, but both of his parents were born in Greece. And my mom is Anastasia Vergos and she was born in Greece and she came over just after World War II. As a matter of fact, she—she and her family got stuck in Greece in 1939. My grandfather had come over and was going back and forth working you know with Jim's Place and—and he was over here when World War II broke out and so they were stuck in the little Greek village. And then what a lot of people don't know is after World War II, Greece had a very violent bloody revolution for a year and—as a matter of fact there was a book by a *New York Times* reporter by the name of Nicholas Gage called *Eleni* that chronicled what a lot of—of families that had American connections that lived in the mountains faced and it was a fairly bloody situation. But she came over like I said not—as soon as that was over.

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RF: Is your family interviewed in that book or featured in that book?

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JV: No, no; it's a little bit of a different part of Greece but the—the story is the same and the situation was the same. It was very bloody and what—what happened briefly is the people that fought the Communist, I mean fought the Germans in the mountains were the ones that tried to take over the governments. And they were supported by the Communist Party and they fought the Royalists and the Royalists ultimately won. And you know it was just kind one of those classic revolutions that was occurring. I know you're going to ask me a little bit about how the Rendezvous and I can elaborate on that because—actually my parents' wedding was arranged. The marriage was arranged because my father was in World War II and he literally got one of the

Dear John letters and when he came back from Greece expecting—I mean from the War expecting to get married and she no longer would marry him. And so my parents are probably fourth cousins and so they told them that they had a woman coming over from Greece with some sisters—would he be interested? And so anyway they ended up getting married in 1947.

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And really how the Rendezvous evolved is it—as soon as he got back from the War he didn't go in business with his father but he and his brother-in-law started a diner in downtown Memphis called Wimpy's. And after about a year he concluded there was not enough money in it for two families to live yet they were hung in a long-term lease. And so he told his brother-in-law, look; you keep the diner. I'll go in the basement and try to create something and—and that's what happened. He went down and cleaned the basement. There's a picture of here on—on one of the walls. And he didn't really have any money to decorate and—and the way he decorated was going up and down Main Street getting old movie pictures and odds and ends and different things and started hanging them up on the wall which is really the beginning of the décor that you see at the Rendezvous. And you know over the course of years, like somebody loaned him a Civil War gun and he—I mean you've got collections of all types here. And you know it wasn't something he planned to do; it was just filling space.

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And—and really when the Rendezvous started we really didn't start serving ribs 'til probably 1954 or '55 but it was—it was just a tavern. He just served beer, ham and cheese sandwiches and he had little appetizer plates of cheese and pickles and—and peppers and—**[*Interruption*]**. Sorry; you can edit this?

00:06:23

RF: Sure; well I want to back up a little bit and get a bit of the history. This—this basement that you talked about it—it's not—was it at the present location where we are now at Union and Second?

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JV: No, no; it—it was about 50 yards from here and were in that basement and it seated 80 seats until 1968 and he had to move because—and National Bank of Commerce at that time was taking the whole block to build a skyscraper. And so—actually we owned the building at the Corner of Bealee Street and Third at that time and we were going—and that's where he was going to put the Rendezvous. He's going to put a record store in the main level and a Preservation Hall type blues place on top. Well it was about the same time that Dr. Kings was assassinated and so no one would lend him money to go to Bealee Street. And so they kept trying to get him to move out in the suburbs and he did not want to do it and so they finally found this basement which was—and again this basement had never been used and they came in and cleaned it up and we started—the Rendezvous started here in 1968.

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RF: So this—

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JV: So that's 40 years in this location and 20 years in the other location.

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RF: Okay; and—and talk a bit about how—I find this neighborhood very interesting, the history of this neighborhood. We are downtown Memphis, three blocks from the river about—

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JV: Half a—

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RF: Half a block from the Peabody; how has it changed in your lifetime, this—this neighborhood, the clientele you might want to talk about, it's—there's sports teams and—and hotels now? How has it changed?

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JV: Well you know like any—most major American cities maybe with the exception of New Orleans, downtown has died you know in the '60s for a lot of different reasons. We—a lot of places bailed out of downtown; I mean there used to be you know all up and down Main Street there were probably 100 restaurants in those days. But what's interesting is by 1975 there were only two restaurants in downtown Memphis opened after 6 o'clock at night, and the Rendezvous being one. As a matter of face we used to kid and tell people, if they were downtown they were either lost or looking for the Rendezvous, and you know there was a lot of pressure to move out. But we never did because we always—we always did business. As a matter of fact, my father and I renovated the first—in 1976 we bought an old cotton warehouse and—and got a group of people and we renovated the first downtown cotton loft department in Memphis really as a model for other people and you know a lot of people will consider my father kind of the father of the modern downtown Memphis. And you know where downtown used to be the commercial

center with department stores and movie theaters and restaurants and what have you, you know it has changed. Yet from—and—and people forget the Peabody closed down from probably 1975—'76 to 1980.

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And so you know the transformation in downtown Memphis that we've seen where there was no one living downtown to now you probably have 10,000 or 15,000 people living downtown, the restaurants are back, some retailing could be better—of course we've left a lot of corporate heads, a lot of law firms moved out but a lot of them have come back in and, you know, we've got other companies that have moved downtown. So downtown Memphis you know for being an inland city I—you'd know I'd rather be in downtown Dallas, downtown, you know, Atlanta really—Birmingham—it's a really—I think it's a pretty neat downtown. It's compact; you know Memphis isn't blessed with mountains and things but—but our view of the river from our bluff is pretty spectacular.

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RF: Can you talk a bit about pre-'70s what you—you mentioned that in the '70s there were only two restaurants left at night. Do you remember a bit about the restaurants before then; I mean I've seen pictures and read a bit of history about downtown Memphis. I know Beale Street was loaded with barbecue joints up until that time?

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JV: Actually not—not really. We were the first—we're the first restaurant that I know of that sold ribs commercially. Now if—if—there was a place on Bealee Street called Johnny Mills just off of Beale Street. And now again I'm talking about during my time; now going back in the '20s

and ‘30s you know Beale Street transformed several times. I mean the ‘50s and ‘60s it would be a lot of pawn shops and a lot of meat markets. A few—Club Handy was down there etcetera but as far as serving barbecue ribs, we’re the first place that I know of that—that did that. You know ribs were a 4th of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day kind of picnic food that people would cook at home—to actually cook them and serve them ‘cause Memphis was really noted more for the barbecue sandwich and which is you know the chopped shoulder on the bun. And if you eat it Memphis style you put the coleslaw on the shoulder and eat it together. And so it—it was you know—and the way we do the Rendezvous Ribs, I mean I think it’s one of the unique food products in the country ‘cause it’s—and I hate the expression dry ribs ‘cause I don't think adequately defines what we do. But we can get into talking about how we cook it and all that kind of—. I can tell you the history of how it started—what caused them to start cooking ribs.

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RF: Sure; yeah I’d like to find out that history. I mean you started in ’54—’55; you started cooking ribs.

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JV: Right.

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RF: And—and ribs at that time were kind of an oddity to serve at restaurants. It was something that people would at home. How did that go over with—how did—how did your father tell the story? How did that go over with clientele at the time?

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JV: Well they really were a byproduct and with the exception of the African-American community, which you know the poorer people learned how to make things work with byproducts of animals because you know the people that have the money are getting the tenderloin and the chops and all that kind of stuff. And so you know they—and—and in those days there was just not a market for ribs and they would take them and grind them up and put them into silage. So when my father started—decided to try ribs for the first time you know I think they cost him 10-cents a pound.

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But what—what happened—what got him in that direction was he had an old coal shoot and he used to have people smoke his hams for him. And so he closed it up and started cooking with charcoal and started smoking his own hams. And then looking to expand his menu he was just piddling; he was you know working the restaurant and knew how to cook. He tried a lot of different things; he tried chickens. He tried lamb. He tried things but it never—I don't know he was just never that happy with it, and so he started cooking these ribs and really just for—'cause he just happened to be cooking during the day and he wanted to try some ribs. And—and our being Greeks—Greeks based all of the meats—we do the lemon or vinegar, salt, pepper, oregano and garlic. And so he—and he did that, and you know they were okay.

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But he went to—he had gone to New Orleans I think in 1954 'cause I remember I was six and it was our first vacation. And he really was fascinated by the cayenne pepper, the chili pepper, the paprika, and—and those kind of good Cajun—Cajun spices.

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RF: The red spices.

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JV: And so—the red spices—and so when he came back he kind of took some of that and took some of the Greek seasoning and kind of threw it together and that's what people—and I don't like the expression rub but that's the dry rub and—and that's what we use today. It wasn't anything that he—it wasn't a real scientific means. He was just kind of a lot of Greeks; just throw on a little of this and a little of that. And so he would take the vinegar solution and baste the ribs and put the seasoning on them and somehow that recipe and—and that mixture of seasoning is—you know people just love it. I love it and it's great on other things. And you know we don't rub the ribs; they're not dry ribs. They're never—they're just Rendezvous Ribs. I tell people they're not juicy; they're not wet and I know you may not want to go in a lot of the details but I do have to tell you what I—the reason I think the Rendezvous Ribs are—is good.

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You know people talk about wet ribs and by that they mean putting a lot of barbecue sauce on them.

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RF: While they're being cooked?

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JV: Some—you know while, before, during, after whenever, but you know I think that when you—if you can take the time and trouble to smoke meat or cook it over charcoal you don't ever want to mask the meat and the smoke flavor and sometimes people are so obsessed with the

sauce I always tell them you might as well just put it on some bread ‘cause you don't—you don't get any of the meat. And—and one thing I think that our ribs do is it’s just this wonderful culmination and fusion of—again that’s kind of a trite word in the restaurant business—of—of the smokey flavor. You can still taste the meat yet you get the tanginess of the spices and—and I just think you shouldn’t even mask the meat. And the other—the other thing about cooking any food and ribs is—I think you have to buy good meat and you have to cook it right. I mean you can do a lot of stuff and I think that the ribs that we use—they’re not spareribs, they’re not St. Louis cuts; they’re loin-back—and they’re not baby backs—I think is the best cut of the—of the meat. They don't—I don't like them to just fall off the bone. I like a little crispiness to them. I think you should be able to chew ribs and that’s why again the dry rib expression—we never called it that. I think ribs should chew a little bit.

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RF: I want to ask a question; I mean you keep bringing up your—your Greek heritage and your father. What—what did he cook at home? Did he cook Greek; did he cook American or a combination of the two? Did he cook at all or was it—so did he have time to cook?

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JV: Well actually he—he rarely cooked. I mean my mom is an excellent cook, and you know when he started the Rendezvous it was seven days a week 364 days a year. I mean he would only close Christmas—he closed Christmas and Easter and you know being Greek you always have to have the big Easter bash. And so he rarely cooked at home. My mom is an excellent cook and people claim that she still makes the best—and I believe it—the best spanakopita, the spinach pie and all the Greeks in Memphis will tell you that she does, so he really never cooked at home.

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RF: And well what else did your mom cook? I'd like to ask about that.

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JV: Well I mean she cooked a lot of the foods from her village. I mean she cooked spanakopita, pastizza, the little tito patiki, the cheese puffs. She made great chicken oreganato; I'm not a lamb eater. She cooked lamb; she made a lot of lentil soups and it's funny. If you—if you visit her village in Greece—

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RF: What's the name of that village?

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JV: Well it's called Katohora—K-a-t-o-h-o-r-a—and it's about 30 miles west of Delphi. And but it's interesting; when you go to her village, still running wild are greens and cabbage and—and you know 'cause they don't farm there anymore but I remember growing up eating neck bones with—with chicken and rice soup, a big Greek Easter soup; it's called mayiritsa but it's literally the entrails—it's literally chitterlings and so you know we have a lot of African-American employees down here and they'll bring in some neck bones and think oh you guys don't know anything about neck bones. And it's funny how greens—how people that grow up in a poor part of the world all seem to find these you know—I mean they have poke salad and turnip greens in the South but we've got our own type of greens that we—we use in Greece and a lot of potatoes, a lot of rice, like corn and so—it—. But now those things are kind of delicacies

and—and you know it was—a lot of it was basic cooking. Of course tons of olive oil, a lot of feta you know a lot of olives and you still can't beat a really good—a real Greek salad with tomatoes, cucumbers, feta and onion with oil and vinegar and a little oregano.

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RF: Which—which I see on the menu here.

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JV: Yeah; but—but we don't do it true because, you know, you can't get good tomatoes anymore. It—and so the tomatoes—the good tomatoes are only good for about six or eight weeks in the summer so we put more lettuce and—and all. We've kind of Americanized it some and I kind of hate you know when I was growing up you would have tomatoes in the—you know good tomatoes in the summer; you had strawberries in March and April and you know now you got all this year-round stuff and it's kid of dummied down in my mind all of the food products. You see these big beautiful strawberries in December but there's just no taste to them.

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RF: Right; well I want to ask a little bit more about—

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JV: Am I going on too much on different—?

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RF: Oh no, no, no; this is very helpful—very great. I want to ask more about the Greek community here in—in Memphis. I know in—in New Orleans where I come from we have a Greek Fest in late spring every year; they roast dozens of—of whole lamb and can you talk about the community? Was there—was there a central building or—or community center? Was it—?

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JV: Well there's a pretty big Greek community in Memphis. As a matter of fact, our Priest, Father Vieron—V-i-e-r-o-n—Nick Vieron, Father owned a little diner by the train station in New Orleans so he's a resident of New Orleans. And New Orleans has a really big Greek population. Memphis has a Greek, a large Greek population. As a matter of fact, contrasting Memphis and Nashville, Memphis has a strong Jewish community, strong Lebanese community; you know Nashville is just kind of white bread and—and I just think that you know Memphis just has kind of a rowdiness. It appeals to me as a city. New Orleans has many of the same factors. As a matter of fact, it's—the Delta, Greenville, Greenwood had Greek communities and several Greek restaurants. There's one Lillo's that was in Greenwood that was there for many years and so for some reason the Delta attracted a lot more ethnics than you would see in Middle Tennessee and East Tennessee.

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But—but we—there's a Greek church and all of the Greek families and you know we're one of the big ones I mean in numbers, on Easter all roast lambs on the spit, Easter, and as a matter of fact Greek was my first language 'cause you know my mom came over in '46 and got married in '47 and I was born in '48 and she did not speak English. I didn't speak English until I was about four and still to this day, my cousins and I—some things just translate better in—in Greek and we kind of you know make jokes in Greek and so I—you know we still speak it. I

don't speak it quite as well I used to ‘cause my grandparents—both of my grandmothers never spoke English. So if you wanted to communicate you had to speak Greek to them.

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RF: What do you-just if you could talk more about that; why do you think there are so many ethnicities especially what we know about the Greeks along the Delta? I mean I know the Southern Foodways Alliance has interviewed other Greek restaurateurs and perhaps it ties into the—the fresh produce, the soil which is richer than anywhere else in the nation?

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JV: You know I don't know that there is a—you know Memphis they were—they were important cities in those days and a lot of ethnics that sailed over—migrated to port cities, but I mean we’re not a port city like New Orleans or Houston on the ocean. You know in my family we—we’re still not sure how my uncle who came from Greece—and my grandfather, how they really ended up in Memphis because my—my grandfather ended up in Memphis because he had a cousin that was here. And so you know they just kind of booked passage and went and found the nearest relative or the nearest person from the village that they know and of course a lot of them never got past New York or Chicago or—or wherever, so it’s not—it’s not been well documented to me ‘cause I asked older Greeks how we all ended up at least in Memphis. You know I just think a lot if it was just happenstance.

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RF: Do you know which port your—your grandfather came through?

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JV: Well he came through Ellis Island and—and he went to Bridgeport, Connecticut, and then he went to Charlieton, West Virginia, and then he went to Texarkana, Texas and we have a few relatives in Dallas. There was—what's the old Greek—maybe it was the Pantheon, Parthenon and Mr. Semis—Chris Semis who was the Legislator he was a cousin. The Regis family in Knoxville are distant cousins of ours, so—you know it—it's—I just—I mean that's the best explanation I can give to that.

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RF: Did he—was he in the restaurant business before he moved to Memphis? Did he work in restaurants in the Northeast?

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JV: No; he—he worked as a—we—we—I think he worked for a boot shop maker for a period of time and he ran a pool hall or worked in a pool hall for a while and then I guess he encountered—he—he—if I had known I was going to have this interview I would have interviewed my grandfather you know 25 years ago and got a lot more detail **[*Laughs*]** and we should have done that. But so some of this stuff is lost to history, and our families don't go back you know to a lot of the Wasps you know they can trace their heritage back to 1600s and we can only go back to the 1890s. And then you got to go to Greece and try to figure out where everybody is from.

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RF: So your grandfather is still alive?

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JV: No, no; no they've all—all my grandparents have passed away.

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RF: But your—your father—?

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JV: My father is alive but he's—he's been sick. He has Alzheimer's so he hasn't come down in about eight or nine years. I mean he'll—he'll come down but he's really not—as far as any involvement in the restaurant—.

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RF: He lives—he lives in the area?

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JV: He lives; yeah he still lives at home and—and you know my mom is still living and so I do—you know sometimes there's just not answers to things and I do get interviewed a lot just you know how did your parents—how did your grandparents get here. I don't know that there's a clear answer. It's just like when we get interviewed, people want to get the detail about why is barbecue—you know they want to get into the physicalness and they get into all this philosophy about barbecue and I always tell them you know why is it so popular, and the only reason I can ever conclude that it's popular, is that it tastes good. And—and it never goes out of style and it's truly Southern and it's truly American and it's truly unique. And so—so I mean—you know I get

just as excited eating a barbecue sandwich today as I used to when I was a kid and we'd go to Leonard's and my parents would bring Leonard's Barbecue home. And as a matter of fact people still tell me; well I hear the Rendezvous has got the best barbecue, and I say no. I said let me tell you something; there's good barbecue all over Memphis. I mean I know 'cause I eat it. I do think if you have one night to eat barbecue I think you should come to the Rendezvous 'cause it's—I think it's one of the unique restaurants in the country. I mean my—pardon my bragging a little bit but I—it you know coming from a poor background it just—it surprises me the people I bump into all over the place a bit. I mean I just—people call me up and say I was in Omaha and bumped into someone who said something about the Rendezvous and I—I don't appear overwhelmed when they say that to me because it just happens so often. And again I hope I'm not being real cocky saying it; I'm just stating facts and stating the fact that my family has been very blessed in this community and Memphis has been very nice to us. And one reason we've never franchised is I mean this is kind of who we are and what we do and—and trust me. We've had opportunities to open up many more restaurants but I just can't see the Rendezvous in some mall or some strip center with a big old asphalt parking lot in the front and you know if you run a successful restaurant you can make a really nice living in all of this—besides our employees. I mean you know we—we employ 75 people and we all do pretty well.

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RF: I mean there—there is a charm to this room that most restaurants don't have.

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JV: Yeah; this is the newer side. Yeah; because I mean we—the original Rendezvous had 88 seats. When we moved over here we expanded to 230 seats; now we seat 750 people and on—

our busiest Saturday night ever was last year two days before New Year's during the Liberty Bowl and we fit 4,000 people.

00:28:22

RF: Can—can you talk a bit about your clientele? I mean when I—when I first came to Memphis in '05 this was the first place that my friend took me. So I know tourists come here; it was so packed during the Liberty Bowl, but locals must also eat here constantly.

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JV: Yeah; we—we do get the rap—well you don't want to go to the Rendezvous. That's where the tourists go. Well I think there's a reason that the tourists come; I think that it's a really good restaurant. You know at—at some point in time we've pretty much fed everybody. And you know my—my grandfather theory was, serve a quality product at a popular price and our prices I still think are reasonable here. And so you know you'll have—you know people in tuxedos after—after the Symphony sitting next to people that came down from Frazier you know and sitting and you know eating in overalls. So I mean we get a tremendous mix. I mean you know from racecar drivers to—you know we're very close to Al Gore and close to Bill Clinton and George Bush was down here with the Prime Minister of Japan. I mean as a matter of fact I've—you've probably been told this story to you know how my father tried to throw the Rolling Stones out in 1964.

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RF: I've never heard that story.

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JV: Yeah; **[*Laughs*]** and—and being older than you everyone thought the Beatles had long hair ‘cause they were the first group to come out of England. And really if you look at their hair today it wasn’t really much longer than yours or mine. But the Rolling Stones were a pretty raggedly looking group and so they were on the first tour of Memphis and they were at the Peabody Hotel. And so they came down the Rendezvous and my father was on the verge of throwing them out and was kind of rude to them at first, and then all of the sudden they got a call from the Manager at the Peabody that said Charlie, Charlie. He said the Rolling Stones are coming down there and he made some comment—he said are you talking about those shaggy ass looking—? I’m going to throw them—. He said no, no, Charlie; don't—he probably used more expletives than that. And so he said something to them. He said I ought to throw you out but the guy at the Peabody said y’all know how to play some music or something along those lines. And they still come—every time they’ve toured the United States they always come to the Rendezvous. I guess there most recent time was maybe in ’02 or ’03 and as a matter of fact, I mentioned that to Mick Jagger in—not trying to drop names. I mean we’re not big buddies, but I mean he knew I was the owner and all that and he didn’t remember the story but he does remember somehow they really enjoyed coming down and liked the privacy of it and they’ve—they’ve been coming ever—ever since.

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RF: That’s a really great story. What—what kind of restaurant owner or manager was your father? Was he involved in the kitchen; was he a front of the house person; was he a go table to table and greet the patrons kind of man?

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JV: Yeah; all of those—all of those. First of all he was—he was a big burly guy and he was a pretty tough guy. I mean he didn't take any crap off anybody. As a matter of fact a lot of—Ole Miss—I mean they—they were really—Ole Miss was actually one of the first people that—that discovered the Rendezvous.

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RF: You mean the student body?

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JV: The student body did and—and you know they'd come up for a football game and it was dark and he probably wasn't so strict on IDs back then but we—we won't say anything to anybody but I'm talking about in the late '50s and '60s. And it was kind of a honor roll to see who—who had been kicked out of the Rendezvous, because I mean you know you come in and act up and my father would toss you out. But you'd come back the next day and apologize and you'd be friends for customers for life.

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I—I will tell you a story about Crump if you want—?

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RF: I'd love to hear that 'cause—yeah very interesting.

00:32:11

JV: One of Ed Crump's you know the big shot Mayor you know—during the day of the big city mayors was—he was wild and I don't know maybe a borderline alcoholic but he was a real pain in the ass. And he came down and started a bunch of trouble and my father just got mad—got mad at him and literally—because again my dad was a big guy and he had these steep steps—just literally drug him up the steps and threw him in the alley.

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RF: This is while he was—while he was Mayor or after?

00:32:43

JV: Well even though he was not Mayor he was still running the show and this was probably in the early '50s—maybe, maybe—I can't give you an exact timeline on that. But the very next day a police officer came down and said Mr. Crump wants to see you. And my dad had no idea what this was all about. And he thought the guy was kidding and he said no; he said Mr. Crump wants to see you. And you know Mr. Crump was in the insurance business but—he had his fingers in everything and controlled really the State House, the Senate—whatever. And so he finally went to Mr. Crump's office and Mr. Crump said young man you had a person causing you trouble last night. And my father said yeah; he said that son of a bitch was giving me all kinds of trouble and I threw his ass out. Did I do something wrong? He said that son of a bitch you're talking about was my son. And my father said he—his professional life just flashed before his eyes. And he said he kind of came up from his desk and he said—he said I'm going to let it ride this time; he said I'm going to tell you something. He said I don't care; he said I'm not going to start a bunch of trouble. He said but if he comes down the next time and starts trouble he said don't throw him

out. You call me and I'll come drag him out of there. He said so you know go back and run your business, but I don't want to see that happening again. So my father was really relieved.

00:34:05

But as he was getting ready to walk out of his office Mr. Crump said young man; let me ask you a question. And my father said what? Who handles your insurance for you? And my dad said some other agency and he gave him his business card and he of course changed to Crump Insurance **[*Laughs*]** the very next day so that's kind of the way things were done in those—in those days. But we have a good portrait of EH Crump that's a great picture of him. I know a lot of his family members want to get copies of—you know some of his heirs to do it. But you know we should have documented a lot of this. I mean one of the Governors almost died down here from eating bear meat.

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RF: That—that bear?

00:34:44

JV: Yeah; Beaufort Ellington was kind of a big drinker and he had a little crowd of people and they'd come over and go duck hunting and the Rendezvous wasn't open during the day in those days and so they could come down here and drink and he has little—he had his posse like they do now and they would bring different things and my father would cook it. And so one time they brought bear meat and he didn't you know. And they said can you cook some bear meat? You know he was—he was a Mess Sergeant in World War II and he goes sure; I can cook anything and he didn't realize you should parboil bear meat 'cause if you don't do that and you start to chew it as you swallow it—instead of it getting smaller it expands. And so he kind of went back

to the table to see if everybody—everything was all right and he looked over and the Governor was over there turning blue **[*Gestures*]**. And my father just freaked out so he just reached around and grabbed him around the chest and just squeezed him and a huge chunk of bear meat. He claims that he invented the Heimlich maneuver right then and there. But again the same situation you know his professional life flashed before his very eyes 'cause he thought oh my God; the Governor is going to die in my restaurant over some bear meat that I cooked.

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So you know if—if you stay down here long enough like you said who is your clientele; I mean we kind of serve everybody. Plus we're not open for lunch except Fridays and Saturdays. I mean a lot of business deals have been made and a lot of people gone from the corners and have their meetings and we're pretty closed mouth about things like that. You kind of learn the restaurant business to be discreet. I mean we've actually had a husband with his girlfriend in one side of the restaurant and his wife and kids in another side of the restaurant and my father would you know would go over there and kind of pull them aside and said I think you better go out the back door because your wife and kids are—so the guy would haul ass out the—out the back.

00:36:37

RF: So he sounds like the consummate showman, like he can make everything—?

00:36:41

JV: Well you asked—what does he do? He was involved in cooking; I mean he—he would greet the people, he'd run the floor. You know he'd—he'd cuss you out. He wouldn't—I mean he didn't—I mean his theory and I really agree with it is—it's not the customer is always right. I mean we—we cook our ribs the best that we can. We try to put out a great product and you know

we cook a lot of ribs and we can burn them up with the best of them. And if people have ribs that aren't like they should be I mean we'd happily take them back 'cause we want you to be happy when you leave. But you know we don't—we don't tolerate a bunch of crap from people and you know that—like—like the people—you know some women would come 'cause we used to—Delta—a lot of airlines would—would—Peabody and Delta used to have a lot of friends in Memphis and my uncle worked for Delta for many, many years. And so they all kind of knew the Rendezvous and you know you had the stewardesses would come down. And you know if the guys are drunk and go over there and try to join them, he never—he wouldn't allow that. You know and if they gave them a hard time you know he would toss them out. He just felt that they—they came down there on their own. I mean he didn't want it to be a pickup joint. He didn't want prostitutes. He really ran a—a clean—we still—you know I think that we do; we run a pretty clean restaurant.

00:37:57

RF: Did you—did your mother help in the business at all?

00:37:59

JV: She never—she never—never helped.

00:38:02

RF: She wanted to stay away or—?

00:38:04

JV: You know she—that's not the Greek—the Greek way. You know the mother is at home and she runs the household and he runs the business and—and that—you know those twains never meet and now—you know like I said the kids did. And my brother and I both worked down here when were little from washing dishes to busing and ringing cash registers. As a matter of fact I mean our employees, you know we've have employees that have been down here for—. We kind of all grew up together.

00:38:31

RF: And there's you and how many brothers?

00:38:32

JV: One brother and one sister; I'm the oldest. I'm four years older than my brother and eight years older than my sister.

00:38:41

RF: Okay; and tell me about—I mean I've read a couple of interviews with your father. Tell me a little about Little John who was a—a cook, the rib cook maybe for a while in the '50s.

00:38:51

JV: Yeah; little John—I don't know exactly where my father hired Little John. He may have been at another restaurant but he was my father's working partner and the only time off my dad would get I mean he's—up until you know the last 15 years he was the only guy that ever had keys besides my father—between the boys to the restaurant. And he cooked and he waited tables

and he was—like I said; he was his working partner for a long time—long time. I think Little John maybe passed away—he lived a long time, maybe 15 years ago but he was—.

00:39:34

RF: Did he keep working 'til the end?

00:39:34

JV: No, no, no; he—he retired and had Social Security and—and I think he had a little bit of—was left a little bit of money and so he'd—he'd come in and visit, but you might ask—if Big Robert is still here, he may—I can't remember when Little John passed away. But he—you know we—our employees—my—my father and I disagreed on many, many things but one thing we always agreed on and he always is—is the best investment any businessperson can make is in your employees. And our employees—of course the ones that are tipped—make well but we pay all of our employees' health insurance, all of our employees' dental insurance. We have paid maternity leave for female employees. They have a month's paid vacation a year and as a result our employees have—you know Robert, Sr. has been here 44 or 45 years; his son has been here 22—Jack has been here gosh 38 years, Percy, Bobby—I mean all these guys. Like I said we all kind of grew up together but you—you know they—they're great guys. They're part of what makes this restaurant unique but you know they're well compensated. And it does—it does hack me off when you know if the Rendezvous can people's dental and employees' dental and health insurance it pisses me off that you know Wal-Mart ought to be able to do it. It's—it's everybody's best interest.

00:41:04

RF: So does it make it a sort of family atmosphere here at the restaurant that—that trite saying I guess?

00:41:08

JV: You know it—it is—in many ways it is and you know a lot of—you know like I tell people; I never fire anybody at the Rendezvous. They fire themselves and it's you know—it's a good job, they're paid well, you—. It's—it's kind of frustrating to me sometimes; I'll be out and about—occasionally we cater big parties and—and people you know they're kind of running and I think they're going to say hey John how is it going? And they'll just walk by me and go hug Percy or Bobby or one of our employees. They're more popular than—than we are so and they're waiting—I mean they're waiting on their third and fourth generation people. You know they'll see couples have their engagement and get engaged down here and then you know their grandkids will be bringing their fiancés here. So it—you know it's—I don't know how you would duplicate a place like that today. I guess you couldn't until 60 years past, you know went forward, but it—. As a matter of fact I was in New Orleans 'cause my son is going to Tulane and Lylee Brennan, who—the Brennan family is at Commander's Palace and she was very gracious and very nice and she lived in Memphis for a while. And you know we just chit-chatted about you know places like Joe Stone Crab and I like to put the Rendezvous in some of these categories; there are just not a lot of us 'cause the food business has become so corporate.

00:42:43

As a matter of fact, when—when we buy ribs we used to have 10 or 15 companies that we would buy ribs from and now you know we're down to three and 'cause the market has been so vertically integrated, everybody has bought everyone, and we have a difficult time. I'm concerned about ribs. I think one of these days you may see—instead of a price you'll see market

price next to it because the prices fluctuate widely; you know getting the consistently we like. We cook all of our ribs exactly the same way. It—I just get concerned about the availability of them and one reason we do okay is nobody sells more ribs than we do. I mean we sell 8,000 pounds of ribs a week; that's in five days. But when we go buy ribs we're out competing with Applebee's and Chile's and all these other places that per unit don't even come close to mine but you multiply it by 1,000 units. But what helps us some is that the companies that sell those like to sell us because they can use it as the market and this is the same ribs that the Rendezvous buys. So it—but it's you know it's—it's—my father would hate to hear this; I think it's tougher running a business now—. And we're blessed with volume but it's still tougher I think running a business now than it was—. I mean I can't go grab somebody and throw them out in an alley. I mean I—those days you just—that's the way things were done, you know but people didn't shoot each other in those days either.

00:44:21

RF: Well I'd like to just ask one or two more questions about the famous ribs. I've read that traditionally they were not served with any sauce. There was no sauce on the table.

00:44:34

JV: Well they were meant to be eaten the same way they are now, and as he started putting sauce on the table not that long ago, you know maybe 25 years ago—30 years ago. And we've expanded our menu some and even now I start—I started telling our waiters to tell people because here this expression dry ribs and they'll see sauce on the side and the first thing—before they even take a bite or take a whiff they just douse them with sauce. And so our waiters now are starting to tell people please eat them, you know. At the bottom of the ribs there will be kind of

that vinegar solution and we tell people please dip them in that vinegar solution and eat one as it is. And if you want to use some sauce just put a little bit on the side and kind of dip it—and I'll put a little bit on the side also. But I get really upset when I see people just putting—that's really the way they were meant to be eaten is without any sauce. And I've even thought about taking the sauce off but I don't think we can get away with that.

00:45:37

RF: I think it has—Memphis has influenced the restaurant a bit there.

00:45:41

JV: Yeah; and you know and people say Memphis is the home of the dry ribs and this is going to sound very cocky. I—I challenge anybody including John T. Edge to go back as far back as they can go and see if there was ever an expression of dry ribs. And it only came after the Rendezvous had been in business and it was just an expression some people used and—and the means that they cooked to try to duplicate what the Rendezvous did. And—and I don't mean to bad mouth anybody 'cause like I said there's other good barbecue in Memphis and I'll eat ribs with barbecue sauce. I like them but I'd never eat ribs anywhere that say dry ribs 'cause if you paid 50-cents for them you're paying away 50-cents because they're just not any good and they try to duplicate ours and they can't quite it right. And that's not to say that other ribs aren't good. Again I'm not trying to—or the barbecue sandwich; like I said before, there's good barbecue all over Memphis because I eat it, but dry ribs I wouldn't—I wouldn't touch. And but—but if you want to come eat Rendezvous ribs you can eat them here.

00:46:56

RF: Okay; well thank you.

00:46:57

JV: I mean we—we do ship them you know. We ship our ribs all over the country but I mean that's the only place you'll get Rendezvous ribs is at the Rendezvous or have—none of that dry rib crap.

00:47:07

RF: All right; well excellent. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

00:47:12

JV: Probably but I won't—I've given you quite a bit of info I think so I don't know if this is where you wanted the conversation to go or—.

00:47:20

RF: Oh yeah; no it's been—been a wonderful talk. I want to thank you.

00:47:21

JV: Yeah; well I appreciate it. And like I said I'm—I'm 60 years-old too so I'm the exact age of the Rendezvous so I—I go back a little further than my brother for the early days and you know when I was eight or nine I remember 'cause he was only four, so it—I think that that's it. If you're roaming around and I think of something that I should tell you I'll be—.

00:47:45

RF: Okay; well thank you very much.

00:47:46

JV: Okay; my pleasure.

00:47:46

[End John Vergos-Rendezvous Interview]