

RICHARD HODGE
Richard's Bar-B-Que - Bolivar, TN

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Date: August 2, 2008
Location: Richard's Bar-B-Que - Bolivar, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 28 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Richard Hodge-Richard's Interview]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is August 2, 2008, almost one o'clock. I'm in Bolívar, Tennessee, at Richard's Bar-B-Que with Mr. Richard Hodge. I'm going to have him introduce himself and give us his birth date.

00:00:18

Richard Hodge: My name is Richard Hodge. My birth date is November 10, 1943.

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RF: And are you the owner of this restaurant in Bolivar?

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RH: I am the owner.

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RF: And how long has Richard's Bar-B-Que been around?

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RH: We've been here about 20 years, a little over 20 years.

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RF: Okay; and—and as I understand you've had a long history in the barbecuing business. Have you owned other restaurants before this or ran other restaurants?

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RH: I've—I've had three places that I didn't cook at as long as I have had here, and sold both of them.

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RF: What—what were the names of those restaurants and where were they?

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RH: My first one was kind of a nickname. It started out as a joke. We put up a 16-foot metal outbuilding and converted it into a little cafeteria type thing. And I kept that opened for about—I guess about three years and then sold it.

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RF: What—what was the name of it?

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RH: Uncle Odd's. It was—it was named after the cartoon character. *[Laughs]*

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RF: And—and was it here in town?

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RH: It was on Highway 64 East, and the other one I actually didn't have a name for it. It was one of those quick pickup type jobs. I was out of a job and I thought I'd make me one so I put

one of those in until I could find a job. I later figured out I could do a little better financially if I opened another place. So that's how I wound up here.

00:02:00

RF: And did you serve barbecue at those other two places, or was it other types of food?

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RH: Barbecue was the only thing we had—just strictly a shoulder barbecue.

00:02:10

RF: Okay; and—and tell me, the first time I visited here about a month ago you were telling me about—about growing up and—and eating and watching people cook barbecue. Well let me ask; where did you grow up? Where were you born first?

00:02:26

RH: I was born in Hornsby, Tennessee and they had an annual 4th of July picnic for the community and the entire West Tennessee would show up at it. It would literally be hundreds of people and the elders would get under a barn in case it rained and dig a hole in the ground and put their pigs on and stay with them all night. I'd go up there when I was very young and kind of enthused about what they were doing and watched to see how the process was done, and it kind of went from there.

00:03:08

RF: What—was it a special weekend? Was it a holiday weekend?

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RH: Fourth of July—every 4th of July they had an annual picnic and they had ice-cream, barbecue, cotton candy, just—it was just a little picnic down there. The Governor showed up every year for the 4th of July picnic.

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RF: What—what town was it again? Can you spell it?

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RH: H-o-r-n-s-b-y.

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RF: Okay; how far away from Bolivar then?

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RH: It's about 10 miles east.

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RF: Oh okay so not far?

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RH: No.

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RF: And—and men would cook in teams? Would they cook whole hogs?

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RH: Yeah; they—they cooked whole hogs on it but they may have 15 to 20 hogs on under that barn and it would be God knows how many of them sitting around there watching them. Each one of them had their own particular job to do.

00:04:00

RF: But was a competition or was everyone doing it together?

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RH: No; it was just a community effort. There's no competition, no nothing.

00:04:07

RF: So would you go down with your family?

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RH: Well I lived right there next to where they were—they were, and parents didn't care. I mean it was safe—didn't have to lock your door back in those days.

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RF: Right; did—did you ever get to help as a youngster or was it just strictly watching?

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RH: No; they wouldn't let anybody—anybody help. You could watch all you wanted but you couldn't—they wouldn't let anybody but them do that.

00:04:33

RF: Right; and—and these men, were they—were they farmers? What—do you remember anything about them?

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RH: All of them were farmers, yeah; most of them older—older type people who had been doing it for years.

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RF: Were they probably using their own pigs that they were raising?

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RH: Yeah; they—they—every 4th of July each farmer had pigs that they raised especially for the 4th of July.

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RF: And—and it was all—it was strictly whole hog barbecue. Was it—I mean was the—was there a sauce used, similar to the barbecue we see today just on a larger scale—on a whole hog?

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RH: Well I do it the same way as they did, a direct—direct heat using the wood product. The sauce they used was more of a vinegar—it wasn't—it wasn't a real thick sauce but it was—the best I remember it was good sauce.

00:05:38

RF: Did—did the women of that town or the area have anything to do with it? Did they make any food?

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RH: Yeah; the women—the women did the potato salad and slaw and—and all the trimmings. They made ice-cream. I don't know how many containers of ice-cream they would have but it would be somebody making ice-cream all day.

00:05:59

RF: And so what year or about how long ago did you open your first restaurant that you talked about?

00:06:07

RH: The first restaurant was 1978.

00:06:12

RF: What—what did you do between those years? What did you do before you opened the restaurant?

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RH: Well I was—the first one I was a real estate salesman and opened that just kind of as a hobby on the weekends and then I finally—after the interest rates went so high I went into it full-time to kind of tide things over, and then I got a pretty good offer on—on the purchase of the building. So I sold it and like a dummy; I should have stayed in the barbecue business.

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RF: Was—was it hard those first years in barbecue or did you know enough? Did you have to teach yourself?

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RH: No; pretty well. I remembered how the old people had done it and built my pit and went right to it.

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RF: And so the—the pit that you use today is similar to the pit you used back in—in '78 and back then?

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RH: Yeah; it's—it's identical.

00:07:16

RF: Can you describe the pit, how it's laid out, and did you build it yourself—the one that you have now?

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RH: I didn't build it myself; I had—as a matter of fact, Glen helped me build it. The pit is probably—how tall is the block—eight inches? My pit is 24-inches from the ground in height; it's four-foot wide; the longest pit I have is approximately 16-feet long and I have one pit that is an eight-foot pit and four-foot wide, the same height. I figure with as much heat as you have in your blocks and each block is filled with concrete, if you—building it that height will eliminate the chances of you burning your meat. If you build it closer you're going to have more exposure to your heat and you have to watch it more closely.

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RF: And so the blocks act as an insulator because it's far away from the meat? Is that what you're saying?

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RH: Yeah; well—

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RF: Because the fire is far away from the meat?

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RH: The walls of your pit will—they'll heat up just like a—the same basis as an oven. Once you get—once you get your cinders in underneath your meat it warms your wall up and then you

can kind of back off on your—your heat and have less chances of actually scorching your meat. It will turn out just kind of golden brown instead of having the burned look to it.

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RF: And what kind of fuel do you use—what kind of wood?

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RH: I used strictly hickory for several years, and then I ran across a charcoal that is 90-percent or 99-percent hickory charcoal—natural lump charcoal. I converted over to that and I can't tell the difference in—in the taste of the meat.

00:09:45

RF: And—and well let's—let's talk about the food; let's talk about the cooking process. You cook shoulders; why do you cook shoulders and not butts?

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RH: To start with I don't like butts. If I were using a gas grill butts would probably be fine; direct heat you're actually cooking the butt and the shank portion of it at the same time. You have more lean meat actually from the butt part down to the shank than you do with the butt only and your yield out of a butt by itself is lots less than you will on a whole shoulder and you do get the white meat out of a whole shoulder.

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RF: Did you ever cook and sell whole hogs?

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RH: I—I've cooked whole hogs but I just—our demand—I can cook approximately three shoulders for the belly part which you get nothing. I can use—I can use that belly part to put two to three shoulders and have lots more barbecue at the end of the day than I can with the fatty part of that hog. But we do cook the ribs; with the belly part all you're getting is rib anyway.

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RF: Right.

00:11:21

RH: We do cook ribs for people that do want ribs. And that's—that's mainly—and you have—with a whole hog you have—if you bust that—break that skin when you turn that meat with direct heat, your pit is going to stay on fire all night long. You've got to watch it very close.

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RF: Did you—when you tried whole hogs did you sell them or was it for yourself at home?

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RH: No; we actually sold the whole hog product over here.

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RF: Oh you did?

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RH: Yeah.

00:11:57

RF: Was it special order or was it long ago?

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RH: If I run across a pretty good deal on the price of a whole hog or find somebody that needs to get rid of some I'd take it off their hands.

00:12:11

RF: Let me ask you; do you—I want to get back to the shoulders but first, do you remember any old barbecue restaurants growing up here that came before you eating at those places?

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RH: God well you had one they called the Pig Pen out there; they didn't sell a large volume of barbecue but they had a good product and then you had a—what was the name of Joe's place out there? There were two or three—there were—there were—they had one over to Toon's and older fellow had—that had good barbecue. There's been several good barbecue places here.

00:12:56

RF: Were—were there any ever—were there ever any whole hog barbecues in this area?

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RH: The one at Toon's is the only one I know of that—that did whole hogs.

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RF: Let's get back to the shoulders; how long do the shoulders cook for?

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RH: I cook the shoulders approximately six hours; I look at them. If the bone is pulled away from the shoulder I'll turn it. If it's not I'll cook it on another—'til seven hours is up. It just mainly bases on that—on that shoulder bone. If it's pulled away from the meat a little it's ready to turn. Then cook it slow heat for about seven to eight more hours.

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RF: So do you put it on at night and cook it overnight?

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RH: Well I used to do that when I first started out and have stayed out all night, but I figured out those things will cook just as good in the daytime.

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RF: Oh really?

00:14:02

RH: Yeah.

00:14:02

RF: Does—a couple barbecue people have mentioned to me that weather affects barbecue. Have you found that? I'm just asking this 'cause it's—it's about 110-degrees outside and some people talk about humidity and heat affecting the—the cooking time and temperature.

00:14:15

RH: Right; yeah and—when—when it's cold we don't have any kind of heat in there where our pit is and if you cook it like I cook you've got—air is actually sucked inside your pit. It take—it takes longer in the wintertime than it does in the summer.

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RF: And the—the shoulders are they salted or spiced beforehand?

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RH: Well, if I was doing a competition shoulder I would cook them for—I'd salt them, put those things on; when I'd turn them I would use a vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, salt, and pepper with a vegetable oil base—sauce and I'd do that probably three to four times before they actually got done. It will soak that flavor in around that bone area and then also soak it in through the skin on the outside of it.

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RF: So you've done competition barbecue?

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RH: I did for about four or five years.

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RF: Where—where was it—what competition?

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RH: Well I cooked for the Bar Hogs out of Memphis and we did the local Lakeland, South Haven—wherever they had a Barbecue Festival we'd—we'd go to it.

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RF: But you're saying here when the—the shoulders that you serve to your customers here they're not salted?

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RH: No; they're always salted.

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RF: Oh they're salted too, okay.

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RH: Sure.

00:15:52

RF: Okay; so the same way and what about the ribs? Are they prepared beforehand?

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RH: Okay; the ribs—I—I use my own dry rub on that and it consists of lemon pepper, Cajun seasoning, lemon pepper, and I've got two different types of Cajun seasoning in there and then we sauce them down after they get done.

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RF: And how long do your ribs cook for?

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RH: It depends on the size—somewhere around two and a half—three hours.

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RF: How would you describe your—your clientele that eats here? You seem to—you're a very busy place. Both times I've visited you're very busy; how would you describe the customers? Is it mostly locals?

00:16:45

RH: Uh-uh not necessarily; we get a lot of people on Saturday—who ride out from Memphis or Jackson and come down and sit at the picnic table and sit out there and have their own private little party. But my clientele you may have a man that owns 10,000 acres; I had a man in this room that we're in back here now that had sold a business for \$663 million. That was a couple of weeks ago. I've had Jerry Lee Lewis back here. Yeah; it's—you may have the brokest person that's—you've seen in town or anywhere standing up there next to the judge or a doctor or anybody.

00:17:34

RF: What is it about barbecue that—that is so important to this part of Tennessee? Why barbecue and not hamburgers?

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RH: I'm sorry; I don't think I can answer that one. It's just—it's just an old Southern tradition I guess.

00:17:53

RF: So do you think—let me ask; do you think the barbecue tradition comes from the country—that all this—I mean I've been in Memphis and most of my time I've been staying in Memphis. Do you think Tennessee barbecue comes from farms and that tradition that you grew up with?

00:18:11

RH: I understood the way that barbecue was established was people used to let their hogs run loose out in the yard sometimes. And a house fire trapped some hogs underneath it and when the fire was out, somehow they decided to sample the meat and that's where—where I heard the origin of barbecue came from. And it was in the South.

00:18:51

RF: Do you remember where you heard that story or when?

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RH: Oh no.

00:18:56

RF: It's so long ago?

00:18:59

RH: It's been a long time ago.

00:19:02

RF: So and—and how would you describe the—the sauce that you serve here? Is it—is it sweet or vinegary?

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RH: It's a sweet, spicy—I use—I use three different type spices in it and I use half vinegar and half ketchup.

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RF: Oh is it your own recipe?

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RH: It—yeah; it's one of them I created myself. I was told by a man one time what to put in it but he wouldn't tell me how to make it.

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RF: Ah who was—who was this man; was he—?

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RH: Well that deer up there on that wall, I killed and a friend of mine wanted a hind quarter of deer and he duck hunted, so he traded me three ducks and a gallon of barbecue sauce for the hind quarter of that deer. And the next time I saw him I wanted to know how to make that sauce. And he said I'll tell you what I put in it but I'm not going to tell you how to make it. He said if you can come up with a recipe—so about five years later I started gathering up all the stuff I remembered that he made and started experimenting with it and about 500-gallons later I finally come up with a—a pretty good sauce.

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RF: And—and so I'm guessing you—do you hunt? Do you hunt often?

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RH: I used to hunt and fish all the time back 20 years ago. But with this place you don't have time to hunt.

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RF: I—I spent some time—well down the road in—in Lexington last week and a pit master told me out there told me his customers would bring him different things that they hunted to barbecue. Do people do that here?

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RH: Sure; yeah rabbits, coons [*Laughs*], squirrels, just you name it—wild turkey breasts, deer—just pretty much in general whatever they get.

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RF: So is it—is the—can you cook all that meat and—and birds? Is it similar to pork? Do you have to watch it a certain way or turn it more or less?

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RH: Yeah; you've got to do—you've got to baste—you've got to keep that stuff basted. You can't just put that stuff on. All of it you've got to go slow and watch it.

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RF: Uh-hm.

00:21:37

RH: And I can't tell you how long the time period is. I've never worked with a thermometer and everything is—is strictly a visual—cook guy. I just—I just look at it. **[Laughs]** I can't—I can't tell you; I would say probably around 225—250-degrees.

00:22:02

RF: So what makes the—the barbecue that you serve here good? Why—why do you think it's good?

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RH: Huh, I guess probably the way we cook it; it's cooked like I say direct. It gets all the effect from your smoke. The salt is put on there early enough that it soaks in and we cook it long

enough for your smoke to penetrate the meat. That's—that's the only thing I—that's the only thing I do; I just put it on and cook it.

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RF: Does—does your family help you here? Do you have family members that work here?

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RH: Family is the worst help that you could possibly hire. *[Laughs]* You can't tell them what to do; they work when they want to. If they need money they'll just go get it, so you don't work the family—no more family. My wife works here and she can get anything out of there she wants.

00:23:05

RF: Okay does your wife—does she cook anything or make any sides?

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RH: Yeah; she cooks—she cooks a good portion of the ribs and the chickens. Yeah; we do serve a bologna and I use strictly a Sterling bologna and put it on there with the shoulder—I meant with my ribs and chicken and if we take the chicken up we take the bologna up, but I don't actually put a lot of heat under the bologna. And we sell—we sell as much bologna as we do the barbecue.

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RF: And—and is the bologna—do you wrap it in foil? I've seen it done that way or you put it—
?

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RH: I have never cooked with aluminum foil on a piece of meat.

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RF: Never?

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RH: Never.

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RF: What does it do to a piece of meat—aluminum—wrap it in foil?

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RH: Well you don't get the full effect of your smoke; you don't—you just change the taste of it.

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RF: So there is something about the fat dripping on the—on the fire?

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RH: Yeah; the smoke that you saw when we looked at the shoulders, 100-percent of that is coming off the fat from the meat. The actual charcoal products don't produce any smoke.

00:24:23

RF: I have a question about fire. Several people have told me that you're—you're not a pit master or a pit man until you've had a serious fire. Have you ever had a serious fire in your barbecue career?

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RH: Well in '93 Halloween night I woke up the next morning and lived at Grand Valley and come over here and I could see the highway when I pulled in the back. We burnt down completely and I got a witness over here—had a catering job on the next Thursday and I had enough volunteers and enough help that Sunday night we had the concrete clean and watered off and we were reopened on Thursday. We missed four days work; we increased the size of the building in the process and were Health Department approved after four days. That's amazing. The lady at *The Bulletin* interviewed me and wanted to know when I was going to open. I said well we're going to open Thursday. And she kept asking me when we were going to open and why we opened Thursday I don't know. But we did. But yeah; you pay attention after you burn the place down.

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RF: [*Laughs*] And is that why you do your—your shoulders during the day and not overnight? Did that help change your mind?

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RH: Well yeah; if you do it at night I'm the only person that's here to do it and you know if you've got something else that you've got to do it doesn't take but a split second for a pit to catch on fire if you've got a lot of grease lost. When you turn your shoulders if you ever break

that fat you're going to have a consistent drip of fat and it will burn just like gasoline. But in the daytime I've got enough people walking in and out if I do check—I mean they'll check if we got one. And I'll tell you another secret; if you do have a direct heat barbecue pit, if you will take the door that you fire your charcoal with and cut about a two-inch round hole in the center of that door if there's a fire anywhere in that pit it will light that hole up like a light bulb if it's a small fire or if it's a large fire, and I learned that accidentally.

00:27:05

RF: So what do you see as—as the future of—of Richard's Bar-B-Que?

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RH: Wheelchair. *[Laughs]* We have—we don't have any plans to quit until we just get so old that we can't.

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RF: Well good—good; and I—I think that's all the questions I have unless you want to add anything.

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RH: Nah; that's all I know.

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RF: Okay; well I want—I want to thank you. This was very good; this was very interesting.

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RH: I appreciate you being here.

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RF: Thank you, sir.

00:27:39

[End Richard Hodge-Richard's Interview]