

Pat Mares
Ruby's BBQ—Austin, Texas

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Southern Foodways Alliance
&
American Studies Department
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:
Lisa Powell

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

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Lisa Powell: Today is Tuesday, nineteenth of June, 2007, and we are in the offices of the Central Texas Barbecue Association on Lamar Street in Austin, Texas. This is Lisa Powell and I am interviewing Pat Mares of Ruby's BBQ. So, to start the interview, could you please state your name and your age or your date of birth?

Pat Mares: Hi, I'm Pat Mares, and I'm fifty-six years old, and the founder and owner/operator of Ruby's, along with my husband Luke.

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LP: So, could you tell us a little about the history of Ruby's?

PM: Well, we opened in 1988, in November. We took over the lease of the property we're at, which had been Fajita Flats prior to that. And one of the owners, we negotiated the lease with him, and so we subleased for about ten years. He was very helpful in giving us information on the restaurant business. We were in there for a couple months, and we had the brick pits built, which is, of course, a big part and the main staple of the barbecue business. We actually modeled those pits on Kreuz's brick pits in Lockhart, where the fire pit is to one side and the the grates and grills carry through and you've got a flue at the other end, so the process is actually low fire, low heat, and a lot of smoke. And we experimented on those pits for about three weeks or four weeks before we opened, and had to get them seasoned before we opened. We opened in November, and it was a really depressed economy in Austin, and most of our friends thought we were really crazy. I heard later that in 1988 there was about ninety percent failure of new

restaurants in Austin, so. But we survived those few months. We were very lucky. I feel like in retrospect—I think for the first couple of years we were working all the time and didn't have days off, but of course we were lucky to have our own business and be doing the work that we were doing, and really enjoyed it. But definitely, it was difficult. We were fortunate in that the *[Austin] Chronicle* offices at that time were just up the street about three blocks from us, and they were big lovers of barbecue, so we definitely got some business from them and while we didn't have much of an advertising budget, by January in '89 they did a really complimentary review of us, which was really helpful. So they've been a big supporter of ours, and we've been really thankful for that. The location we're at, at Twenty-ninth and Guadalupe—also, right next door was Antone's nightclub at the time we were opening, which was one of the deciding factors in opening in that location. I think every barbecue place—there are so many barbecue places in central Texas, and every one has their little specialty or focus. And at the time, we figured blues and barbecue—you couldn't go wrong. So, that was one of the reasons we opened there. And I know Clifford [Antone] used to give us some plugs from the stage, and we'd have some of the musicians coming over between breaks, and that also within the year led us to expanding our hours to where on Fridays and Saturdays we're open until four in the morning. Those were the old days *[Laughs]*. Probably for about five years we did that, until times changed. There were more places around town that were open twenty-four hours. Some of the blues musicians that were a big draw and were getting a lot of people to that area, some of them were passing away, and the crowds were different and the scene was different. So one year we cut back to three o'clock, and then one year two o'clock, and then finally, about ten years ago, I think we went to midnight. So, our current hours are eleven A.M. to midnight, seven days a week. But going back to Antone's, again with the blues, that's been a major factor, and I think the focus of our

establishment and one of the things that keeps people coming back, or one of the things they enjoy about Ruby's, in addition to the food experience. I'd say the other thing about Ruby's is the food in particular. Within a year, we went to using all natural beef brisket. That sort of became our moniker. Always, we've been involved in food, Luke and I have been somewhat foodies, I guess. We always came from that background, we both cooked a lot, always read the Wednesday *New York Times* section on food, and so we decided from the beginning that we were not going to take the easy route and buy packaged potato salad and coleslaw and beans, which I would say that the vast majority of barbecue restaurants buy prepackaged side dishes. Everything is made from scratch. And definitely, talk about a labor of love when you own your own business, but also in making the decision to use brick pits and make all of our food has really contributed to high food and labor costs *[Laughs]*. But we do a traditional potato salad, for example, and we do another potato salad that has purple onion and Dijon mustard, a bit more of a gourmet style. We're billing our food as hand-crafted. And, do you want to know the recipes, or—

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LP: Well, if there is anything you'd like to share about the history of the recipes, or how you decided to use the recipes that you use—I don't want to ask you to give any secret recipes—*[Laughter]*.

PM: Well, actually on that, we do somewhat share recipes. I know some people hold things close and near and dear, but we do share recipes. As far as the history and background of our particular recipes, Luke, my husband, came up and during the time when we were getting the building and the grounds ready, signs put up, and redoing the interior walls and texturizing, we were also

doing recipes. A friend of ours helped us open Ruby's, Greg Schilling who's a musician, who previously had been managed by Luke. And some of the recipes were Greg's—like the chicken salad and coleslaws. And the majority of the main staples were actually Luke's recipes the—barbecue sauce, the rubs for the meat, the barbecue beans, the chili. Most of those were his recipes. The potato salad came about—we kept fine tuning the traditional potato salad and talking to the guys who worked at Antone's, who worked the back door, bar backs. They were from the East side and they would come over and taste the potato salad and say it did not taste like Mom's. And of course that's probably—particularly in Texas, I think the potato salad is particularly hard because you're always being compared to Mom's potato salad. But anyway, they'd say, "It doesn't have enough egg or enough mustard," and Luke kept changing it up until we settled on the current one. I'm not sure they'd still say it's as good as Mom's, but that's how the current potato salad came about. Some of the other recipes were contributed through the years by staff, the collard greens and the vegetarian chili. Some of the newer items, probably, I had more of a hand in. We'd start with the basic recipe then play around with it until we came up with, I don't know, pulled pork, sweet potato pie. I probably did more of the dessert end of it. I have a Czech, farm background from Nebraska, and so grew up with a lot of fresh produce and cooking and baking when I was young. So, I probably was more into the dessert line of that and then, some of the vegetarian food, which sounds a little bit odd, also, being a meat-intensive restaurant. But the area we're located in, being near the University [of Texas at Austin], and with Wheatsville [Food Co-op] up the street, and it just seemed like something we needed to do. A lot of times with barbecue, you have family, friends getting involved, and it's groups of people, and you inevitably do have vegetarians in the group. So we developed—we're actually known for our black bean tacos, that's one of our vegetarian items. And I just got an email from VegAustin

[a vegetarian clearinghouse website, www.vegaustin.com] saying that we're listed, and I'm a little surprised about it, being a barbecue place it seems really obvious. But you have some vegans and vegetarians who do not like the smell of it and would probably not want to step in the door. But just, in terms of the economy and just trying to please the public and develop something for everyone. We have a pretty broad menu and a very small space, so it gets difficult at times. People are always asking for cornbread, which we've tried but feel like we can't really pull it off. We don't have the space to store it and it just got to be some complications, so. But yeah, most of the recipes—and as far as cooking, mastering of course, the barbecuing itself was the big thing. Like I said, we spent several weeks on that, trying to get the right temperatures and cooking times. And of course, with brick pits and using all wood that's never easy, it's completely hands on and intensive. Luke did more of that in the beginning, I was closing at night and he was opening in the morning when we first started. And there were definitely times when I was setting the overnight fire and pulling meats on and off the grills and running the pits. I don't do that a lot at this point, but still definitely you'll see me back there. We have new staff in training and I'll be working with them on meat temperature and texture and feel, when to pull the meats when they're done. A lot of that's just working in food all of my life and growing up on the farm where we slaughtered animals and always had a full refrigerator of meat.

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LP: A couple of times you have mentioned that you've worked in food all your life. So, could you go back and talk a little bit about some of the things you did before Ruby's?

PM: Of course, cooking, as I mentioned before, at home—there were only five of us but we had a big garden, and we did the traditional canning. I was basically all home cooked meals growing

up. My first job outside of the house was the Sky Theatre in Schuyler, Nebraska, and the concessions. We didn't really do much cooking there, popcorn is about the extent of it. But after that, when I went to college in Lincoln, I worked at a fried chicken restaurant, a pretty large restaurant, and worked in restaurants pretty much up until the time we opened Ruby's. Here in Austin I worked at El Gallo, a Mexican restaurant in South Austin. And then when Kerbey Lane South opened up—actually, Luke and I were both on the staff that opened Kerbey Lane South. And I was there for a couple of years, until we made the decision to open Ruby's, and then left there when we opened Ruby's. My other interest has been Latin America. And I've been—I have a degree in Latin American Studies and have traveled a lot, and in addition to working in restaurants, was working at the [University of Texas'] Benson Latin American Collection here in Austin for many years. So—and actually, the black bean recipe is one of mine that came from a colleague of mine at the Benson Collection who was Cuban. So we kind of did a riff on that recipe to come up with our vegetarian black beans. So everything's intertwined *[Laughs]*.

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LP: Wow, have there been any other ways in which your interest in Latin American Studies has influenced your work at Ruby's?

PM: Other than a few twists on food—we do have the tacos, which has been a big seller. You know, I don't know that there's been that much. Certainly, being near the University, and I do speak some Spanish, the Latin American Studies group will come in. And sometimes, near the end of the semester, we'll have different events with them. But, I'm not exactly sure how that all ties in.

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LP: You've already said so many interesting things. I'm going to go back and ask you to talk a little more about a couple of them. You said that, of course, when Antone's was there, the blues were a big part of the culture of your restaurant, and you said that still attracts people to Ruby's, even though the nightclub is no longer there. Could you kind of talk about the tie that the restaurant still has to blues culture?

PM: Certainly. As I said, when Antone's was next door, we were back and forth constantly between their staff and musicians that would be over at Ruby's. And our staff would be over there, which is one thing I really miss about it. Take a fifteen-minute break, run over the Antone's through the back door, and you know Buddy Guy is in your face, Albert Collins. It was a special time in Austin's history, as well as our history, and they're pretty intertwined. And Clifford was always very generous. He frequented the restaurant a lot, and I know he promoted us. He loved barbecue a lot, and I know he ate it a lot of places, and I'm sure he promoted a lot of places. But it was definitely very special and we definitely miss him, it's been a year now since he passed. Some of the special times would be, you know, three in the morning with Clifford, with Kim Wilson, of the Fabulous Thunderbirds who was pretty much a constant sidekick of his, and with Derek O'Brien, a local guitar legend who should be recognized as such, and Derek still comes in a lot, of course. And then, like I said, Albert Collins in particular stands out, of course Pine Top [Perkins] and several other musicians used to come by. Of course, right across the street, the other direction from the Antone's club on Guadalupe was their record store. And when we took over Ruby's, actually the back part of the record store was where the Antone's record label began. And we did parties for them, and we still work with them on special occasions, doing food back and forth. A big supporter of ours was Maceo Parker, he

really enjoyed our food. And frequently for large shows, we would provide food for backstage, for the musicians. Either for discount, sometimes donated, it just depended on the circumstance. So, we developed a really close relationship through the years, we were probably there together nine to ten years. We've continued that. They're downtown now. There have been some changes. Susan [Antone] is running the club more now and just email and visit periodically, and we do send for special occasions, they've just commemorated one year since Clifford passed on. So, we did food and sent down to the club backstage, you try to recreate the old times and that feeling. A lot of people have moved out of town, but for special occasions they come back to town.

Whenever Maceo comes into town he requests food, others like Joe Ely, Jimmie Vaughn, a lot of times when they play the club I think they request Ruby's food. So, we still do have that connection, though not on a daily basis anymore. And we certainly still enjoy the blues, and keep playing the blues and Derek O'Brien and a few folks were in just last week and they were commenting again that you go around Austin and they always enjoy the music played. Of course that's their music and what they enjoy. There's been discussion of course, some of our staff—our younger hip—and they periodically feel like we should change the music and insert something else. I personally have been one to say, "No, we're going to continue to play the blues." I know we definitely have people who come in for the blues and because of the tie with Antone's. We have a lot of posters on the walls, a lot of photographs that Susan Antone took from the club days when it was located near us. And we definitely have people coming in who sort of make a pilgrimage to the old club and the record store and stop in at Ruby's as well. So yeah, I still feel like there's a connection there. In fact, Clifford was teaching his class the last few years, he would come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays and bring some of his students to eat. So, we kept up that relationship even after the club moved, and it's been a good one through the years.

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LP: So, you've mentioned a couple of times the proximity to the University of Ruby's, and how that has influenced your menu in some ways. What other sorts of ways has being so near to the University sort of influenced the restaurant?

PM: Yeah, I can think of a couple ways. Certainly the food, like I said we're developing more vegetarian items, and hand-in-hand with that, it's not just that there's a market for that in our area, but it's helped a little bit to cut down on our food costs, because I don't think that people think about the fact that barbecue restaurants are really meat intensive, and meat is expensive. I know we have much higher food costs than somebody who's in Italian food, Mexican food. Just by its nature you have higher food costs. So obviously, introducing more side dishes or more vegetarian items, we've introduced salads after a certain point, all that's going to help to temper the food costs a bit in terms of meat intensiveness. But definitely, besides like vegetarian items and tacos and salads, one other way it influences us is in our hours. Initially, I think we might have only been open till ten and pretty quickly expanded to midnight. Number one, just to be able to pay rent and pay bills you want to be open longer, and Luke and I were, you know, a large part of the work force. So we'd be open, but we also realized that in our neighborhood you have a lot of young people and they're up late and out late. So, while a lot of places close at ten we chose to stay open till midnight. And sure, sometimes even now we're a little slower in the last hour or so, but there are definitely times when we're busy at the later hours, so that's definitely been an influence. And I think I mentioned that we decided within a few months after we opened to go with the all-natural beef. When we started out, we were using I think a Granada

beef, and we tried a Black Angus. Most barbecue places use Iowa Beef Packers beef, which is a decent product, but we wanted to go a different route and do something special. I guess, being handcrafted food, we're always trying to look for something else away from the mainstream. But at the first winter we were open, the manager of the deli there approached us about perhaps purchasing their all natural beef briskets because they were purchasing, as a lot places do, their beef in packets, which means it's got a whole side of cow in there or a whole half. And in the wintertime they were having a hard time selling the brisket. So, they approached us about buying the brisket from them, which we did. And it was Bradley 3 Ranch of Childress, Texas, the B3R brand, and we were really happy with them. The meat itself was a good product to start with. It seemed to pick up the smoke flavor really well. It was tender and really a different texture from what we had been using, so that led us to contact the B3R. And we started to use the brisket from them within the first six months or so that we were open. We were with them until a year or year-and-a-half ago they sold out to Coleman Beef of Colorado, so now that's where we're getting our beef. And I don't know if—to say that—obviously, I think in our neighborhood that works well, there are a lot of people concerned about health, and certainly there are some folks who will say that they only eat brisket at Ruby's because they know we do use an all-natural product. And I'm not sure if that grew out of a factor of the neighborhood or not, but I think people knowing about, thinking about food promoted that.

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LP: So, continuing to talk about the meat a little bit, you mentioned the construction of your pit at the beginning of the interview. Could you, kind of, maybe walk us through the process of cooking meat, of cooking your meat, and what is unique about the Ruby's method of meat-cooking?

PM: There are definitely a few things that are unique about it, but I think to the barbecue style and the traditional wood-smoked meats of the Texas style, I don't know if it's unique or that different from other folks who do the same thing. We do have brick pits. In fact, I don't know how many barbecue places in Central Texas still use brick pits, I think we're one of the few and particularly in the style we use them. One thing about cooking in brick pits, obviously they're large and bulky and they don't have rotisseries on them and you can't smoke that much on them. So within a year or two after we were open, we had to add another pit. The original one was inside of our kitchen in a storage room, and then—now we have built another pit outside. We do use all wood, and it's, like I said, a lot of places to do volume you pretty much have to go to another type of smoker, which many places use which do a huge volume of business, which has a rotisserie and it's operated with gas or electricity maybe and very little wood, but you can cook forty briskets at a time. You set a time and temperature and basically walk away from it, and you can cook your briskets. Obviously with the type of pits we have it's hands on, somebody has to be monitoring the fire at all times. We use, right now, post oak and oak wood. We started out using oak and mesquite but after a while dropped the mesquite. It has sort of a tangy flavor it would impart to the meat, not really acidic but something like that. And in the end, we decided that particularly for the brisket, the oak worked well. So we do use oak wood in our pits, we go through a cord probably in a week. The smoking process using wood is completely hands-on, and it varies from day to day. Sometimes we get wood that's greener and usually you're going to get a lot of smoke and it's hard to keep the fire going and you might not get a lot of heat, so you have to adjust everything. Everything is going to take longer to smoke. Other days, the wood that's wet, you have to try to figure out a method of figuring out how to dry out the wood for a

bit, which we'll put it on top of the fire box for a little bit to try to dry it. If it's a really damp day out, with heavy air pressure, the smoke is not going to pull through the flue as well and it's going to keep the smoke down, and it affects the temperature, obviously, and how the heat is drying, as opposed to a crisp, hot sunny day when everything is going to burn hotter, if it's drier. So, there's just a lot of factors in that. You try to maintain probably around a 200-degree fire, somewhere in that neighborhood, but it's definitely going to fluctuate. Sometimes they get running really hot and you're going to put a little water on it. Other times, you're trying to maintain your coal base. We do put briskets on every night anywhere between nine and eleven in the evening and we smoke overnight. The folks who are closing and running the pits have got their technique that they're passing down from one to the other, of setting their overnight fires. You get a good coal base, get a hot fire going, and of course we have a certain type of logs that we use for overnight cooking and different type of wood that's bigger split than the one they use during the day when they're there to monitor the fire all the time. We use larger logs at night. They have a method of stacking them, and that will keep the fire going through much of the evening. So, when the morning crew comes in the first thing they'll do is get the fires going again, continue smoking. The briskets smoke anywhere from about twelve to twenty-four hours. It really depends on the size of the brisket, the density, and I said a lot of things affect it, like the outside temperature, the humidity, the wood, whether it's dry or green, but they do take a long time to smoke. And that, of course, is what makes them tender, it takes a long time at a low heat. Our ribs—we smoke baby back ribs and St. Louis cut spare ribs—and those probably smoke an average of five to six hours, I guess. We do not put any type of dry rub on those ribs. They're just prepped and put on the pits, on the grates. The briskets are prepped before they go on and rubbed with a dry rub mixture. Again, that's a recipe that Luke came up with, and that's put on the top side of it, to

give it a little bit of seasoning as the meat cooks. The chickens—we smoke whole chickens—large three-and-a-half-pound chickens. A lot of barbecue places use a two-and-a-half-pound chicken, but we found that they really dry out so we use a larger chicken to keep it moist, and these are smoked for about four or five hours. Again, these are averages, sometimes they're done in four, sometimes six or seven, depending on all the factors we discussed earlier. In the last few years, we started doing pork so we smoke whole pork butts, and added ham to our menu, and we smoke whole turkey breasts and all those just have their own peculiarities. Most of them, we just put on and smoke and there's not a whole lot of preparation. We serve the sauce on the side, figuring in most cases if people want a little bit of seasoning, just the natural smoking process develops and imparts a flavor to the meat by itself. We haven't gone the route of Kreuz's where we have no sauce on the table and few side dishes, but nevertheless, there's definitely something to be said for that style.

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LP: And what led to adding the pulled pork and the ham and the turkey to your menu?

PM: A few factors. In part, maybe trying to please more people. Also, maybe a little bit of boredom in the kitchen, where you're making the same recipes because obviously people don't like you messing with the recipes. So, you strive for consistency in the side dishes and in what you do. And of course we've had some staff with us for a few of years and they're prepping the same thing over and over, so some of it might have been looking for something new to try. Expanding the menu, like I said, to appeal to more people, trying a little bit of different style, and being in the barbecue world interested in cooking and barbecue and frequently wanting to try something different. And it's a cut of meat that's juicy and smokes well, definitely lends itself to

the smoke, we smoke those overnight with the brisket. As far as the turkey we've been doing those for some time. There are a certain number of people who try to stay away from red meat in much of their diet, so we offer them chicken or turkey. It's a good item, it compliments the menu. And again, a lot of times you're looking at families and friends getting together over barbecue, and when you've got a group of people, you've got a lot of different tastes. So that led to those items.

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LP: So, a little earlier when I first asked you about how you cook your meat and what makes it unique, you referred to the central Texas style and it maybe being not so different from what other people in Texas are doing. So, I guess my question then would be, what are the characteristics of central Texas barbecue and what makes it different from other barbecue?

PM: Um, well, central Texas, when I think of central Texas barbecue a couple things come to mind. One is the smoking process, which I consider smoking, I guess, which would be as I indicated earlier, the firebox to one side, and you're not cooking over direct heat. Rather, the heat and the smoke is pulled through the pit, where you're actually smoking meats. And another thing that I frequently think, and I guess this is all tied together, and part of it has been our interest and focus, but I think of beef and sausage. That really is a Texas tradition. You don't find brisket in other parts of the country. Somewhat, a little bit in Kansas and Oklahoma, but most other parts of the country, particularly the Southeast, is going to be pork barbecue. So, definitely brisket is unique to Texas. The beef, again, in sausage, and that along with the smoking process, seems to have come from the German and Czech meat markets and their tradition of making sausage and smoking meats to preserve meat. That's, I guess, what I think, basically is central Texas

barbecue. There is another style where they cook more over coals. They actually burn the wood down to produce coals, I think Cooper's in Llano does that, and then you spread coals. You're cooking a little more over direct heat, but it's a different style. I think some people might call that cowboy barbecue. But that definitely you see that in this area, with those coals through a barrel smoker, and you cook a bit more over direct heat, that's another style, and I would say that's probably more of a central Texas style as well.

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LP: Thank you. So just so we have kind of a complete record, we've been through part of your menu here, we've talked about the potato salad and the beans and some of your salads, but what are some of the other sides that you have on your menu? Or have we listed them all? If we have, that's fine.

PM: Well, we have the traditional potato salad, coleslaw, and beans, but we have two variations on all of those three. And we also, within the last four or five years, added mashed potatoes and our version of macaroni and cheese, which is actually spiral pasta. And collard greens, we added several years ago. And I think that's pretty much covers most of our side dishes. Like I said, we offer salads. We added Cajun food to our menu many years ago. A fellow from Port Arthur [Texas], who grew up with Clifford Antone, actually, and was over at the pub a lot—worked for us for about six months and started our Cajun food, which, we have a very good crawfish étouffée and a lot of people who eat it from Louisiana would say it's the closest version to the one that they know. So, I feel really good about that.

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LP: You also discussed what kind of wood you use in your pit, that it's post oak, so could you tell us where you get your wood?

PM: Initially we—Luke was probably going through the paper and calling up people who were advertising that they sold wood, and we would have various people driving up in a pickup and dropping off wood. Of course, that's not a real regular thing, and you spend a lot of time trying to come up with wood. And we have in the past had a few different people who were pretty consistent and we were with them for a year or two, but inevitably there seems to be something special about the wood men. They—some of them kind of come and go and obviously are farming, and I don't know if it's their land or some areas around outside of Austin, so it's rather inconsistent. Several years ago, however, we were put in touch with or recommended to call Lickety-Split, which is operated by Ronnie Vinikoff. And we've been with him ever since. And it's his ongoing business. You know, he's got a location that he farms, and it's been very consistent. We just call him whenever we need the wood, and he brings it in cages in the middle of the night. Like I said, he's been very consistent and it's worked out very well. He's actually got a stable business that he operates *[Laughs]*. And we've been very happy with it. Like I said, we started out with mesquite, we tried pecan a couple of times, we'd buy whatever people had for sale, but throughout the years we've always used oak, and that's what we use now.

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LP: So, at any point, if there's anything you'd like to add, feel free about it.

PM: I might mention where the name came from—we frequently get asked about that. We did not want to call it Luke's or Pat's barbecue. And at the time that we were actually working on the

building itself and developing recipes before it had opened, we were tossing around names with our friends, and we had been watching a Marlon Brando movie from the fifties, *The Fugitive Kind*. Joanne Woodward is in it. And it's set in east Texas or western Louisiana. And at some point they go jukeing. They go to a juke joint happens to be called Ruby's Barbecue, and a scene develops there. But of course, trying to come up with a name that struck us, Ruby's Barbecue, we had been thinking of calling it Market Barbecue, Waller [Creek] Barbecue, and talked to several of our friends, but almost hands-down they felt that Ruby's Barbecue was the best-sounding name. And as a result I've sort of become Ruby, there are a lot of customers who call me Ruby, and they know it's not my name, but I respond *[Laughs]*.

00:37:01

LP: And how did you choose the current logo that goes with your name?

PM: That actually, I would say, was pretty much designed by the woman who did our sign on the roof. She's an artist, she was working on her MFA [Master of Fine Arts degree] here at UT. I don't even exactly remember how we got to know them, but she and her husband were instrumental in helping us get open. She did the sign, which was pretty laborious. It was pretty intricate. We found a skull at one point when we were in Mexico and Luke and I were on a trip, by the side of the road, that we brought back with us, and that sort of became the skull that was on her logo. So she used that, and was basically very precise in her rendering of it. She used it as a model when she painted it, and got every creak and hole and crease in it, just like the original skull, which hangs in Ruby's today. She so we started off with the skull, and she designed the mesa around it. She was instrumental in that. And her husband helped put up fencing, and painting, and did a lot of other construction work. But yeah, Jackie.

00:38:15

LP: Other than the addition of the pit that is now outside of your main building, has the building itself changed? Have you made any changes to the building itself over the years, or added anything else on?

PM: Um, when we first took over the property there was not a fence around it, we added that before it opened. And the side patio that we had, had walls but no roof, and we added a tin roof to that part of it. We've added the whole back area between the restaurant itself and the kitchen, which the kitchen is a completely separate building, and so that kind of creates—with the fence on one side, that creates a patio area. And that was completely open also. We've added, through the top of that, a latticework. And so that's pretty much about it. We're leasing, so we want to do upkeep and keep things in good shape and, of course, enticing to the public, but we haven't done any major renovations. We are small, our dining room is small, the side patio isn't very large, and that has been kind of a hindrance to our business in that Friday or Saturday night people know if we're busy, you might wait. And I'm not saying we're that busy that you shouldn't come because you're going to wait *[Laughs]*. But we're definitely—we're a small establishment. Through the years we've tried to look for ways to increase our business, and fortunately barbecue is really designed for takeout, and again it's designed for groups. So, we do a decent takeout business with people purchasing barbecue by the pounds and side dishes by the gallons. And then we, as most business do, toss around the idea of opening a second location, expanding. Through the years we've toyed with that idea a little bit. It's—being hands-on like we are in a small operation it's just a lot of work. And taking on a second location, would also be a lot of work. We've gone back and forth about that, especially if you want to try to maintain what you

have with the first location in terms of a standard of food quality. I think it get really difficult. And so, one thing that we started looking at with the internet becoming more and more popular, we had a friend of ours design a website a few years back. And then a couple of years ago, Luke really started looking into promoting sales and catering online. And so, that's been one way we've been able to increase sales, which has been really helpful, because more and more people use the internet. And most of the basic information is on there, so it's at their fingertips. So, obviously I think that's the way a lot of things are moving. So, those are some of the changes we've instituted.

00:41:24

LP: You have been calling yourself a small business. Do you have any sort of estimate of how many people might eat at Ruby's on an average day? I'm sure, of course weekends and weekdays vary—or maybe on a Friday night or something like that?

PM: Um, I don't know those type of figures, really *[Laughs]*.

00:41:47

LP: That's all right. So, is there anything that you've found that's particularly unique about being a woman who's one of the two primary operators of a barbecue restaurant in this area?

PM: I don't really think about that. And I don't know, I just don't think about that that much. There are a lot of women in the food business, and I guess I look at it from that aspect. Certainly, initially, Luke was a little bit more about the kitchen, and a pit master, and while I did certainly work with that somewhat I've always been more the organizer, working up front, hiring staff, training, working with the accountants, and setting up systems, operating systems. And of

course, like I said, I've always cooked. So, I definitely have an interest in that, but I've never really thought about it. I know and at some point of course you think and realize that most of the pit masters are men, of course, and you're down throwing wood in fireboxes and you're getting covered in coal at times, and I think it's just hard, it's a hard business. I can see where it comes more from the male side *[Laughs]*. But we definitely have had, even kitchen managers have been women, and we have two or three women working in our kitchen right now, so certainly, like I said, it's just not a thing I always think about.

00:43:46

LP: Going back to the food just a little bit, do you have a particular favorite thing on the menu that you like to eat, or do you like it all?

PM: Well, I think it's all good, or we wouldn't be serving it, but I guess the beef brisket. It seems like all of us at some point have tasted a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and the beef brisket is really good. The potato salad—it just kind of depends on the day and what the mood I'm in for. And some of our salads are really good and mix the barbecue meats with whatever, cheese, and we've got one salad that's got black beans on it. And also, of course, I don't think I've said much of anything about our sausage but we get sausage from Elgin from the Southside Market and have since we first opened. I just feel like that's a really good product and that's certainly something that I highly recommend to people.

00:44:38

LP: I see you have a list there of a few things. Is there anything we're leaving off that we want to go ahead and get to in the interview?

PM: I guess the only other thing might be about, we discussed our clientele a little bit earlier and being in the UT neighborhood, which I probably should state that initially when we opened we really did not get that many students in, we didn't feel like. It was more the neighborhood and people from West Austin. But through the years, we've developed more of a student clientele. I think part of that might be the economy, for one thing, and students are usually on a budget and looking for something that's not going to cost them a lot. We sell a lot of black bean tacos and chopped beef sandwiches, and some of those items have become really popular. But also, of course, when dads or moms come in to take them out to eat, they remember us and go for the brisket plate and that. But in addition to, besides the neighborhood, we do get a lot of people from out of town, out of state, and out of the country. We've always been, of course, with Antone's and the musicians next door, and part of that, as I said, Luke worked with bands and we've always known a lot of musicians. So, we've always through the years had a lot of musicians who dined with us. Through the *Chronicle*, through the South by Southwest conference, a lot of musicians have heard about us and dined with us. That, and then I would say the film industry. And that, kind of, developed somewhat through the *Chronicle* also, or also our interests, and maybe cultivating that. But we work with UT RTF [Department of Radio, Television, and Film] a lot. When students are working on the student films, we donate a lot of food to film crews for student films. And as a result, that spreads the word, so we definitely have a lot of musicians and film clientele.

00:46:58

LP: And before we officially started recording the interview, you mentioned that we had just been through one of the really busy times of the year for the restaurant. So, for the recording, I

guess, what are some of the busiest times of your year, and what sort of events happen during those times?

PM: For us, and I think for a lot of barbecues, again I'll mention that you try to have your own specialty or your own hook, and also depending on where you're located I'm sure it plays a part in different barbecue restaurants, and what brings in business and what are the busiest times for them. I would venture to guess that definitely one the busiest times of year for all barbecue restaurants, even outside of the state, is the Fourth of July. People just eat barbecue on the Fourth of July; it's one of the busiest days of the year. The other times we're busy, South by Southwest is one of our busiest weeks out of the year. It just brings so many people from out of town and out of state. Fortunately for us, being the local or regional food of Texas, most people want to get Tex-Mex, Cajun food, and barbecue. So that brings in a lot of business, and we usually do some catering at that time too. And now, actually, the last couple of years, ACL [Austin City Limits] Festival, again bringing in a lot of people from out of town, it's one of our busiest weeks of the year. So, those are probably our two big ones. There are other times, like graduation weekend because we're near UT, sometimes the football games, that sort of thing. And then there's seasons, catering season for us. April and May is busy, it starts in March in the spring really with the festivals, and then in the fall probably October, November are busy. It seems like there are a lot of events in Austin in the October. And also we do a lot of weddings and a lot of catering. Certainly here in Texas, wedding catering—barbecue is big for that. I know we've done some weddings with people who have relatives who are from the Northeast, and they just really are not sure about barbecue. For being a wedding, it's got to be something a bit more upscale. They'll do barbecue for the rehearsal dinner the night before in some cases, but then for the wedding want a

different spread. That's something I think is definitely unique about Texas. A lot of people wouldn't consider barbecue as wedding food.

00:49:42

LP: Why do you think there is such a strong barbecue-wedding connection in Texas?

PM: I'm sure it just has to do with growing up with barbecue. I assume, kind of, being a meal for a family gathering. It just takes you to your roots, and it's big barbecue country. So, why not have it for your wedding celebration *[Laughs]*?

00:50:08

LP: Well, is there anything else you'd like to share at all?

PM: Well, I'd just like to say that I feel like we've been really fortunate through the years. We've had a good group of people around us, even though we opened in what seemed to be a bad economy we managed to stick with it, not that it hasn't been difficult, as everyone knows with a restaurant, a lot of times you just don't get that many days off, it's really hands-on. But we've got a good group of people working for us, a good staff to take care of things, and we've just had a good nineteen years and developed friendships with people in the neighborhood, and like I said our relationship with Antone's and other groups stand out. And it's just good making friends over barbecue.

00:51:05

LP: And you did mention that you all had kind of gone back and forth on the expansion idea, but do you have any other thoughts about the future of Ruby's or what's in store for the next nineteen years?

PM: Well, at some point we're going to be retiring. I don't know if I'm going to be there for nineteen years, certainly. We're not exactly sure we're addressing those issues at this time. Who knows if we'd consider franchising or an expansion? We've got some people working with us now who I think are interested in continuing Ruby's, some managers, and we'll just have to see what develops. I'm not really sure at this time where that's going.

00:51:56

LP: Anything else that we should talk about? No? OK, well, we can always talk again. All right, so, it is the nineteenth of June, 2007. This is Lisa Powell, I've been interviewing Pat Mares of Ruby's BBQ in Austin, Texas. This is the end of the interview.

[END]

00:52:21