

BENJAMIN DENNIS IV
Chef, Charleston, South Carolina

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Interviewers: Kate Medley, Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance

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Project: Charleston Food + Wine Oral History Bus

[Begin BJ Dennis Interview]

00:00:00

SW: Hit this one and we'll make like a beep—. And that one is silent, so—.

00:00:16

SW: All right; you ready for this?

00:00:17

BJ Dennis: Yeah. *[Laughs]*

00:00:21

SW: So BJ for this, Kate [Medley] is sitting over there and she may have a few questions too but I'm going to have you look at me. So the first thing I'm going to ask you is pretty simple. Could you just say hello and introduce yourself and tell me who you are and what you do?

00:00:39

BJD: Cool; hello I'm Chef Benjamin Dennis, affectionately known as BJ, Chef BJ, born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, Gullah Geechee chef. I like to say I'm about food through—culture through food; personal chef and caterer. I do pop-up events and different cultural events around the city based on the Gullah culture.

00:01:02

Kate Medley: I'm going to interrupt one second. These aren't—I'm not used to these cameras so I have a few questions in between. So this means what?

00:01:11

SW: It just means it's recording. There's nothing—it doesn't mean like—I used to think it meant flash card is missing, but it's all good.

00:01:18

KM: Okay; good. And we're good to go with these flash cards for a while or—?

00:01:21

SW: Yes; so they—they have 42 minutes on them. This one isn't showing that but I'm just watching—yeah. They each have 42; they have exactly—.

00:01:34

KM: Okay; and so the only rule in this sort of filming if you can try not to ever look at the camera.

00:01:39

BJD: Okay; so just look—?

00:01:40

SW: I know there's like eight things—.

00:01:42

SW: I know; sorry.

00:01:43

KM: Okay; I'm going to sit down and shut-up.

00:01:44

SW: So BJ I'm going to—could you introduce yourself again?

00:01:47

BJD: Okay; want me to start off with hello? Okay; hello I'm Chef Benjamin "BJ" Dennis, personal chef, caterer, Charleston, South Carolina, Gullah Geechee cuisine, culture through food. I do pop-up events, caterings, really highlighting the classical Charleston African American food that has kind of been on the downslide the last few years, so we're bringing it back and bringing the culture back. So I like to say I'm about culture through food.

00:02:15

SW: I'm actually going to start there with you and I want to ask you about growing up because you're from Maryville? Is that right?

00:02:22

BJD: Yeah; I'm from a neighborhood right—well the same—it's different neighborhoods, it's the same area but like a block away. I grew up in a place called—we call it Forest, the Forest but yeah Maryville, same area. So I grew up on that side of West Ashley. My roots, my father is

from Thomas Island which is near Daniel Island, South Carolina. His parents—his daddy from Daniel Island; his mother is from Cainhoy. And my mother actually is not from this area; she's a little ways out past the police called Yemassee, South Carolina in Allendale County, South Carolina, so I got the best of both worlds. I'm a Geechee boy but got country roots out—upstate. We like to say the country; we don't say we're Geechee—we don't say we're country in Charleston. They're country to us. So I got the best of both worlds.

00:03:04

SW: Will you tell me a little bit about—well first will you tell me your parents' names for the record?

00:03:09

BJD: My daddy's name is Benjamin Dennis. I'm the fourth. He's the third and then my mother is Linda Dennis.

00:03:16

SW: And could you talk a little bit about for people who aren't from this region, could you kind of describe Daniel Island and Thomas Island?

00:03:24

BJD: Sea Islands, you know and Thomas Island is actually a peninsula but way back in the day the closest bridge was like through Mount Pleasant which was back then like almost an hour, so—an hour and a half drive. so everybody took ferry boats off the peninsula to the city and Daniel Island is adjacent, so Daniel Island is an actual island but going from you know you cross

the creek and you're on the Thomas Island which is Cainhoy Peninsula, so you know my grandfather, his father owned the ferry boat that took everybody from out the islands to the city.

00:03:55

So you know Charleston is full of Sea Islands, so it's one of the Sea Islands on the coast.

00:03:59

SW: And could you talk a little bit about the culture of the Sea Islands? I mean what you remember growing up with the Sea Islands if you went back to visit—?

00:04:07

BJD: I always—always go to the grandparents' house, so Sea Island culture is you know is one of those things where it's very based off of the land, before you know of course you see a lot of big mansions out there—in these—all these islands now but there's a lot of areas where it's still the culture, the indigenous culture, Low Country, black and white. I was always told that on the islands, blacks and white for the most part kind of lived side-by-side because it was more working class, a lot of poorer families.

00:04:37

Sea Island culture is beautiful—a lot of fishing. I raised up seeing ox plowing the field, my grandfather's field. Even when he had a tractor he still loved to use his ox. He fished; he shrimped, so I always ate—I never ate the big—big offshore fish. It was always the—the creek fish, the croaker, the whiting, the sea bass, the—the small sand sharks that would come through the inlets. So you know we ate a lot of that and a lot of shellfish, a lot of shrimp, a lot of the small creek shrimp which is the best shrimp. I don't like big shrimp. I like the small sweet creek shrimp so—yeah.

00:05:12

Yeah; it's a beautiful culture. You know it really was based off land before you know the modernization started happening and you know it started to be very fashionable to live on the Sea Islands. Before it was just marshland and farms, so—yeah it's kind of the culture I remember coming up.

00:05:29

SW: Do you—you know you talked a lot about the fishing and the—in terms of the traditions of the—what—what came, the shrimp and the croaker. Could you talk about maybe a specific dish that you remember your—maybe your grandparents making or your parents, something that came from that—?

00:05:48

BJD: You know it was a couple dishes; my grandmother used to—my grandfather would come off—off from the river with a bunch of small shrimp, excuse me, and she would fry the shrimp in—in the cast iron skillet with—with bacon fat and that's some of the best shrimp I can ever remember. I don't get to eat that anymore 'cause my grandfather doesn't—he's 89, so he is not able to do those things no more. So you know the fried shrimp, okra soup which is our okra gumbo here in the area. She would always throw a load of shrimp in there with butter beans and a little—some type of smoked meat, okra, corn, so that's one of the—. And that's probably a regional dish across the board in the Low Country but that's—. I remember that; fried fish and grits, of course the shrimp and grits, shrimp rice, shrimp and crab rice—that I could bite my finger right now thinking about that.

00:06:40

My grandmother would make the shrimp rice with—and they would get the crabs and they would pick their own crab and it would just be all sautéed together. So we call it perloo in Charleston so it would be like shrimp and crab perloo. So dishes like that really kind of bring back memories. And I still eat it ‘cause both them—they’re both still alive but you know they go to the seafood market now or we’ll bring them fish. But my grandfather did it all. He fished, farmed, hunted so I got—I wasn’t raised like that. I was a city boy but the older I got the more I realized how much it was in me and how much I missed it. That’s why I love to farm myself. I don’t have time, but you know being raised up around it you know I didn’t get to—I wasn’t raised in it because I was in the city but spending weekends with my grandfather and I—I took in a lot. I took in a lot spiritually from him, so—.

00:07:29

SW: Can you talk a little bit more about that like what you took from your grandfather?

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BJD: Oh just the stories, I mean the dishes that you don’t even see anymore, the techniques of you know preservation for them back then. They didn’t have stores. But he would always say the food tasted way better back then and I was like well everything was natural.

00:07:45

But he grew everything. He loves vegetables. I mean peanuts to okra, squash, watermelon, corn, tomato, all that stuff, just stories you know. And of course as kids we had to be in the field with him. We didn’t go on the river ‘cause my grandmother didn’t allow him to take my daddy and my uncle in the river either ‘cause she didn’t want her boys in the—it was dangerous. You know back then ferry boat accidents were prevalent you know and a lot of

people would die you know or drown in the ferry accidents, so she didn't want her boys in the river. But just getting stuff from him growing up; you know just the whole vibe from him like just talking about the stories, talking about the drying the shrimp heads and pounding out to a powder. As a chef I was like wow; that's—that's flavor. But for them that was a way of preserving and the old mortar and pestle that he remembered his grandmother drying chili peppers and making their own chili pepper powder and cayenne pepper and rice was still being grown when he was a little boy in the 1930s, in a pond in the back yard that his—his grandfather used to have rice and peas and all the stuff.

00:08:52

So the stories as a chef, as a culture chef, being from Charleston and if you come to Charleston you don't—unless you know people you really don't know where to find it. For me it was big as I got older and really started to expand into the chef world and really into the culture of our cuisine. So it was huge for me to get that knowledge from my grandfather.

00:09:13

SW: Can I pause y'all for a second? I want to see if you—you can sit—?

00:09:20

SW: Do you want me to kind of—oh you want me to get down a little bit?

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SW: Well I want to ask you this because I think this is now going to be at a right height.

00:09:27

SW: Do you think this is okay if I kind of kneel down a little?

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SW: Yeah; but it looks like it's going to be okay for you for a while.

00:09:31

SW: I can kneel; I'm totally fine with kneeling.

00:09:33

SW: How does this close up?

00:09:34

SW: It's just too hard to deal with. I'm just going to kneel. I promise it's fine.

00:09:40

SW: Yeah; and you should be as close to the camera as possible.

00:09:43

SW: Like right here? The camera is new to me BJ; I'm usually just using like an audio recorder so this is all—

00:09:51

BJD: Fancy now?

00:09:52

SW: Yeah; thanks Kate. I wanted to ask you before I ask you about how you got started in your career, you talked about going to your grandparents on the weekends but you lived in the city. Can you talk about what the difference is in how you ate? Was there a difference in how you ate between being in the city and then visiting your grandparents?

00:10:15

BJD: No; I mean because you know it wasn't a big difference because both of my parents come from farm life so we had a little garden in the back yard. So the same food that I grew up—the same food that we ate at my grandparents' house my mother pretty much made the same thing. So it wasn't really a big difference. You know the difference may be like when we were younger, you know we didn't have to worry about the seafood market 'cause granddaddy would catch all his fish and shrimp. And just maybe the fact that spending the night at my granddaddy's house you could hear late night him trying to run off the deer out of his field from eating all his vegetables; so, you don't see that in the city. You might see raccoons and opossums and people in the big city like raccoon and opossum in the city but you know southern cities you're going to see raccoons and opossums and things like that running around but it was never really a big difference honestly 'cause I mean we all shared with each other, so like if granddaddy had a bunch of okra he would give it to my parents. And so we all shared the wealth.

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So it wasn't—nah; nah. I was blessed to have that balance. So a lot of kids who grew up in the city who don't have family off the Sea Islands they never knew about that life. So for me I had that balance.

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SW: And so how did you get into this? How did you start cooking?

00:11:28

BJD: I flunked out of college. So I flunked—I went to the College of Charleston and flunked out, had too much fun; this was back when Charleston didn't shut down 'til like 6:00 in the morning. So my parents were very upset. So they were like you want to pay for your—you're going—we're going to help you pay through technical college but you're going to pay most of your tuition and pay us rent and you're going to work.

00:11:49

So you know being from Charleston and I've always liked cooking but I never thought about it as a career. Being from Charleston you know most guys work in kitchens or work hospitality or work on the port, so for me it made sense. I started washing dishes; went to school. And then ended up just loving it and just worked my way up the ladder from dishwasher to food—food runner and busboy, expediter, and then I started taking culinary courses at the Trident Tech and graduated in 2003. And just went to the Caribbean after that and my passion took off from there, so—.

00:12:25

SW: What—what brought you to the Caribbean in 2003?

00:12:27

BJD: My neighbors that I grew up with in Charleston were from St. Thomas, so we always used to joke as—when I was young that I'm going to move there one day and I did. It was probably the biggest thing I ever did in my life because it was just all about—. It was big in a sense of me

growing up as—becoming man ‘cause I was on my own. But I learned a lot about our culture because they knew about Gullah Geechee people in the Caribbean which fascinated me. And I—and I’m talking about from Haitians to Jamaicans to people from Antigua and Trinidad and it was like they knew about us and I was like wow. So that made me realize that we have an important culture here and we don’t realize here how important it is. So I wanted to come back—well not saying that we don’t, but we don’t appreciate it.

00:13:13

And when I went over there and it’s like wow; they really knew about us. So it fascinated me, so I came back home with an agenda and a passion to really bring the culture out in the forefront with foodways. So that’s kind of how I got—well that’s the short end of the story. But yeah—

00:13:32

SW: And for people who aren't familiar with Gullah Geechee culture will you kind of—because my questions won't be in this can you kind of rephrase the question but tell me about Gullah Geechee culture for people who wouldn't—.

00:13:44

BJD: Gullah Geechee culture is the culture of African Americans in the Low Country, but then you have a lot of—you have a lot of white folks who were born here, too who speak the language too who were raised up by Gullah families, so Gullah Geechee—Gullah is the language. Words like [cootuh], words like—ah there’s so much, just the—it’s just a language, it’s a dying language. It was an oral language that you know you rarely hear spoken. If I hear somebody speak pure Gullah I don’t understand them. But Geechee is the English kind of variable of that so

we say slang words like [lookherewhat'sgoingonwitcha] and that's kind of like hey look here how you doing? What's going on with you? [Cootuh] is a turtle. My mind is kind of going blank but there's so much like [butu] is food; [nam] is eat, so those are some Gullah words but pure Gullah language if you hear somebody speak pure Gullah it's—you're like what?

00:14:49

But you know that's the culture; you know weird—I say weird in the sense of Gullah people but there are a lot of folks who will say well in the Low Country of Georgia, we never heard Gullah on this side. It was Geechee. So it's always that disparity but it's all one; it's all one, so we all come from the same lineage but pure Gullah is fascinating. It's a very—it's a lot of African pigeon languages put together. Geechee is the African pigeon languages put together with the English language so you know when we say we speak Ebonics a lot of it is slang words like juke joint is a Gullah word. The famous kumbaya that's Gullah; that's come by here, so these are things that you know in the regular American language actually are Gullah words. So that's a beautiful thing about the language.

00:15:40

SW: What could you tell me about okay so there's—you talked about the language, but in terms of the food how would you—what would you say would be like defining food traditions in Gullah?

00:15:52

BJD: Seafood; seafood and vegetables. A lot of food culture history was oral, things like peanut soup. People would be surprised, like peanut soup, they think West African but there are

indigenous like—there’s elders on some Sea Islands who will talk about peanut soup that they used to eat as a kid. So the foodways is—is from the land and from the sea.

00:16:16

It’s all about fresh, seasonal; I think through modernization it has morphed into soul food which there’s differences. Gullah food and soul food, I mean they’re all in the same family but Gullah food is you know very seasonal. It wasn’t always heavily pork-based like you may have—they have that misconception but you know you got to realize back then you raised hogs, you slaughtered hogs at a certain time, and you know what you didn’t have preserved you didn’t have solid meats. You had fresh herbs and spices. So you know bringing back to the indigenous ways and a lot of that is through oral talks with older folks because a lot of that is being lost. So I think yeah that’s the basic of Gullah food, a lot of rice too; we eat a lot of rice.

00:17:08

SW: The oral tradition is that—is that one of the vessels of how you learned these recipes or how—I guess the question I want to ask you is how have you turned those into—how have you brought those into the work that you do?

00:17:22

BJD: Talking to people and then research; I mean you could look at some old Charleston cookbooks and see things like ground nut cake which is peanut cake which was the most popular cake in Colonial Charleston. You don’t see that anymore. But they used the peanuts. They used peanuts in different forms.

00:17:42

So I—I got lost; what was it—what was the—?

00:17:46

SW: Well no; I'm just curious. You talked a lot about the oral traditions and—.

00:17:48

BJD: Yeah; I mean well you know for us a lot of us come—especially my ancestors you know you weren't allowed to—you weren't supposed to know how to read or write, so a lot of stuff had to be oral 'cause you couldn't—they knew if you knew how to write then you was in trouble, so yeah a lot of it is oral, passed down, and that's why a lot of it's being lost because a lot of stuff has been passed down through words and after a while words are no longer—when a person is no longer there and it's not written down then it's lost. So that's why it's important to talk to the older—older folks. Got to keep the traditions going.

00:18:24

SW: And so when you got back to South Carolina after you went to St. Thomas, how did that affect what you do?

00:18:33

BJD: You know when I first got back I still—it's funny; I still wasn't into the whole—I still wanted to be that high-end chef 'cause I had worked in high-end restaurants. So you know I came back and worked with one of the better chefs in the city and then after a while I got tired. I was like man everybody is doing the same food. And one of the biggest questions always posed to me when I'd be out in my chef coat in the city is like hey man; where is this local—what's this Gullah food? Where is this Geechee, Gullah Geechee cuisine? And I'd be like I don't know. And

I said hey wait; I've been studying this and this is what I do. So I just said one day I'm going to start doing pop-up dinners and that's how I kind of got started with trying to bring back the Gullah foods.

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I mean no—don't get me wrong, there's some great mom and pop businesses and you see the essence of the cuisine but true Gullah cuisine has to be seasonal, from the land, what's in season, what's preserved, what you forage in, what's your catch, so you know when I see a lot of these restaurants and they have lima beans on the menu 365 days out of the year, it's like well there's so much other peas and beans that's grown, like we just don't eat lima beans with neck bones. There's so much more out here, so it's a research in history.

00:19:47

SW: Uh-hm; and I'm curious, too. I mean when you first introduced yourself you talked about culture through food. Why—and you also mentioned; I don't—I don't think you meant that people don't appreciate it but maybe it's not recognized or at the time you didn't feel it was recognized enough?

00:20:03

BJD: Well you got to realize in Charleston right now people will say that it's a rarity to meet a local and a lot of these chefs in Charleston they are awesome chefs, but they're not familiar with the cuisine. And it's one of those things that if you're not born into it, it's like me going to China to say I love Szechuan food and I go to that province. I might learn and I can maybe make a couple great dishes but I never can make that dish as good as somebody who was born and raised off that land and that area, 'cause it's in them.

00:20:32

So for me a lot of times like it's not saying that people are not—it's not here or people don't respect it; it's just that they don't know you know how to cook the food. So you know when you're not born and raised on this type of food it's a special cuisine so it gets lost. It gets—kind of get muddles, you know and kind of goes through these phases you know and chefs come in and trying to figure out and putting their spin on it which is a good thing but the essence of the cuisine has kind of been put to the wayside. And that's why we're fighting to bring it back. I'm sure there's some good food that's healthy. It's not fried, greasy food. It's a lot of vegetables and a lot of slow cooking, a lot of one-pot—I like to call it one-pot mixing, just everything in the pot and slowly cooked, so—.

00:21:15

SW: And I want to back up just to make sure I got this. You said you started as—you know as a dishwasher?

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BJD: Uh-hm.

00:21:22

SW: Can you talk about some of the places you worked? You know you also mentioned some high-end restaurants. I just wanted to get—

00:21:27

BJD: I worked at—let's see; I started off dishwashing and worked at Hyman's, worked at—oh it's been a while—so I worked at Hyman's, worked at the Crab House, worked let's see—Crab House, Hyman's, I've been to 82 Queen which was my—kind of my first dabbling into high-end restaurants, Anson's which was my first really foray into like a high-end restaurant, and then Hank's Seafood and I left there to go to St. Thomas and I worked at some—some pretty decent places over there. And I came back and couldn't get a job 'cause nobody was hiring, so I ended up being a kitchen—PM kitchen manager at Fleet Landing. And then I was desiring to work for Jeremiah Bacon, 'cause I had met him when I came home to visit so we finally hooked up and I worked with Jeremiah Bacon at Carolina's. And then I started juggling two jobs, so I worked at night at Carolina's and I worked in the morning—in the morning at Anson's with Kevin Johnson who is now the chef at The Grocery doing prep work and I've been—. Let's see Anson's; I opened the Cocktail Club, Butcher and Bee and now I'm on my own, so independent.

00:22:42

SW: And when you started cooking here as a profession, I mean was anyone else really doing—? I have a kind of a two-part question; I'm wondering like what was happening at the time here in terms of food and a little bit—. Maybe you can answer that first, like when you started cooking in this way what was happening in Charleston? I mean you said you—you didn't really see it that often, so—.

00:23:11

BJD: Well you know—you go in somebody's home and there are great spots to get the food—don't get me wrong, like Allouette's when she was open was doing a more holistic take on it and her food is phenomenal. You have Bertha's Kitchen in North Charleston on the Height—

phenomenal. Miss Martha Lou and she does her great work; it's phenomenal. But there was so much more that we weren't seeing like dishes like oyster and rice and oyster stew and you know it was like these were indigenous dishes of the Gullah culture and I was like well nobody is doing these things. And—and I was like nobody is doing these things and where's it at?

00:23:46

But yeah; there were—I mean Buck Shots in McClellanville their locations, they was Miss Charlotte Jenkins who had Gullah cuisine in Mount Pleasant so there were pockets of folks still doing it, so it wasn't saying it wasn't out there but it—I don't feel there was nobody who was doing it, the whole scope of it in one place. Everybody is doing bits and pieces. You know macaroni and cheese is an indigenous dish in the South; it's American now. To me that's not true Gullah food. You know when you talk about Gullah and when I talk about making oyster patties or oyster and rice croquettes that's Charleston. That's Gullah.

00:24:22

SW: Can you tell me about oyster and rice croquettes?

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BJD: Oh it's just taking some rice and you kind of overcook the rice and let it cool and you fold in some aromatics, some onions, and some bell peppers, some seasoning, maybe a load of flour, maybe egg to bind it and you take some slightly cooked oysters and just fold it in and make little patties and you can pan-fry it or deep-fry it—really good eating. It's almost like a [calos]. We call a croquette, like in New Orleans it's a [calos], so or fritter down here.

00:24:52

SW: I'm wondering when you first started out BJ when you started cooking full-time like what did you start—what were some of the first things you started to make?

00:25:02

BJD: Like when I—like as a kid or—?

00:25:04

SW: No, no; when you—as your profession?

00:25:07

BJD: Um—

00:25:08

SW: Are there some dishes that you started with and then you kind of branched out a little bit or did you try to stay specific to the tradition?

00:25:14

BJD: No; well you know like I said I wanted to work in the high-end restaurant so you know I had a lot of the new American cuisine that people were doing, you know taking Low Country ingredients and kind of you know making it—you know the purees and the beautiful sauces so but me, when I first started cooking you know I worked at some of the fried—like Hyman's was like one of my first—. I worked—I went from dishwasher to busboy and fry cook, so you know fried seafood, she-crab soup, so you saw some of that stuff at like 82 Queen. So that was—yeah

some of those—I started off with some of the basic Charleston stuff, red rice, you know which you don't—nobody does it right unless it's in somebody's house and that's my personal opinion.

00:25:55

SW: Can you talk about that?

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BJD: Just—I tell anybody if you can cook a pot of red rice and make it not sweet and not sour and not overly cooked and mushy but every ingredient separate you're a hell of a cook 'cause red rice can be a tricky dish, very tricky. And that's the dish that kind of shows the whole African diaspora you know that's like jollof rice is the same thing, West Africa, and New Orleans is jambalaya—same basis, all red looking rice.

00:26:26

SW: Wait. Can you start from the top of that and just sort of give us—give Sara, sorry; don't answer to me—give Sara an introduction as to like what is red rice and its North African heritage and—?

00:26:39

BJD: Well red rice comes from, you know red rice was that whole diaspora of food you know like from West Africa is jollof and the rice—the dish and I'm probably saying it wrong, the—and I just found this out, the—the—the dish of Senegal was [thiabaut]. I'm saying that incorrectly but it was red rice. And it's this process they do where they cook the fish in the pot. Take it out. Add some aromatics, add a bunch of vegetables, add this really intense tomato based

sauce, cook the vegetables and take that out, and put the rice in. So that's just like our red rice, so like those rices—rice dishes came with us across the water and so in Charleston we call it red rice. And you can have shrimp and rice with it. You can have shrimp and rice. You can have you know sausage, bacon in it and then you're in New Orleans it's jambalaya. But if you look at all these rice dishes, they all look the same. And it's because of that whole African diaspora connection.

00:27:35

SW: I guess I have a question about that. So in terms of Charleston and the Low Country how—how could you tell—? Okay; you talked about jambalaya and red rice. What are some of the striking parts to red rice, like can you talk a little bit about how you make red rice?

00:27:54

BJD: Yeah; red rice is basically we take—classically it should be seasonal very ripe tomatoes and you just take it—some people take a little bacon and fry it in the pan, take the bacon out and start your onions, your rice in it, put a little—put a little tomato paste in your pureed tomatoes, a little bit of water and you let it cook. So that's kind of the base of red rice right there.

00:28:22

Some people add a little sugar, 'cause if you're using canned tomatoes it can be a little tart, but if you're using really fresh ripe tomatoes it's the natural sweetness. You don't need any sugar, so classically it should be fresh seasonal tomatoes, but you know you can use canned tomatoes. So yeah; it's basically the same—kind of the same take on jambalaya. You know jambalaya may have andouille in it but you know we get too caught up in what goes into what and it's—and you go to somebody's house and it's like if I want to put shrimp, crab, and bacon

in my red rice that's what they do. If they just want red rice vegetarian with just really ripe tomatoes, seasoned nice, that's what they do. So we get too caught up in food stereotyping I like to say because at the end of the day cooking is what you want to put in it. But classically you read the dishes, it's like jambalaya has andouille in it, red rice has bacon in it, jollof rice in West Africa is usually paired with chicken. But that's just the stereotypes. Anybody can put whatever they want in their food, so—. And every household is different.

00:29:30

SW: Are we okay on time?

00:29:32

SW: Uh-hm.

00:29:32

SW: So—

00:29:33

SW: You're running at 30 minutes.

00:29:35

SW: At 30 minutes; okay thanks. Could you talk about how you—you know you talk about—you just mentioned food stereotyping and in your cooking how do you go about avoiding that or is that something important to you to blend those lines?

00:29:49

BJD: I mean yeah; you blend the lines. I just cook off vibration; vibration cooking—there's a beautiful book written by Vertamae Grosvenor, *Travel Notes of Geechee Girl*, one of my favorite books of all time. And she hits it in the head; vibration cooking and that's what it's about. What's in your soul, like my grandmother—my grandfather always talked to me about well my mother had some lima beans, a day just got out of the creek and had crab and they picked the crabmeat you know. They may put that crabmeat in a pot of lima beans, right in. You ask somebody now they're like it don't make no sense. But back then it's like what's available and we come from a culture of one-pot cooking so everything goes in the pot and there's no discrimination.

00:30:33

But we're funny these days, like oh that don't go with that. No; it makes sense and it tastes good it—your belly don't complain about it, so that's how I feel about it.

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SW: Do you think that's something that's particular to Charleston like that doesn't go with that because Charleston has become so—and it always has been—there's been such rich food traditions here but it's you know the—all these restaurants and it's place you know we're at the Food Festival right now—do you think that's something that—that happened in Charleston like this doesn't go with this or do you feel like as—as a community of cooks and chefs and everyone, do people tend to like want to blend these balances together because you know Gullah Geechee tradition as you were talking about goes back so far but then there are all these newer restaurants? And I'm just wondering—

00:31:17

BJD: No; you—I think chefs will cook what they feel in their heart. And you know you don't have to stay within those boundaries, and I think a lot of the chefs that come to Charleston now they put their spin on it. You know you got a lot of chefs who come from the Northeast and they bring that Northeast kind of flare to the cuisine, to the Low Country foods so I don't think there's no boundaries. I mean you might—you might still have the stereotypes of on Friday it's fish fry, but I think that's a southern thing across the board. Friday is fish; you know Saturday is—nobody really cooks, you know Sunday is the big dinner, so yeah. But I think it's—no; I don't think—people kind of do what they want but you know there are still those—those stigmas you know like just like cabbage is only this way. Lima beans had to have neck bones in it. But you can put any type of collard green, mustard green, turnip green in a pot all at once and it's good eating.

00:32:12

So you have to—and that's how traditional foods were.

00:32:16

SW: I have a question for you about you know you being so skilled and knowledgeable about the Gullah Geechee cooking. Do you find that people go to you like you're kind of the resident expert here in the Charleston community that people go to you for—for knowledge? Do you carry your own oral traditions about it being someone who does this—this specific work?

00:32:40

BJD: I mean I—I do but there's a lot more folks in Charleston who have an even more knowledge than me about this cuisine. But I'm one of the only chefs in this area that really

embraces it or that not embraces it but like doing the food, so a lot of folks will come to me. But a lot of times I'll go to my elders and just get more knowledge from them because they know a whole lot more than me. I'm just a small fish in the big pond. There's a lot more out here, a lot more—a lot more folks who know a lot more than me. But I'm just trying to carry on the message.

00:33:10

SW: And I know you've kind of mentioned—you've kind of talked about this in different iterations BJ but why is it so important to you to carry this on?

00:33:17

BJD: This is why people came to Charleston, for—I mean you came to Charleston as a chef because this was a unique food, unique cuisine. And now it's like—it's just like when you come to Charleston now like if you came to Charleston 15 years ago you're like what happened, what happened. And it's a beautiful thing; you know you have to progress, but you got to remember the base roots of a cuisine or just a culture and that's what this—why this is so important 'cause we're losing classical Low Country cuisine, you know and Low Country cuisine and Gullah cuisine is the same thing, pretty much. We're losing that and we can't because I mean like today people were saying wow; this is great. I just did a simple really intense dish of stewed turkey necks and collards and all this good stuff, and that's what people come to Charleston—they want to see and we have to make sure we keep it out here because it's important. It's important. That's what made Charleston the city what it is. That's what made all these chefs want to flock to this city. And now they're like well where is this cuisine at? And now it's being turned to us and [inaudible] but it's—Charleston is becoming a cosmopolitan place and this working class food

has kind of been pushed to the side. But we're not going to allow that to happen so that's why I'm working hard.

00:34:38

SW: Can you still cook—you said your grandfather is still around?

00:34:42

BJD: Uh-hm.

00:34:42

SW: Do you cook for your grandparents or your parents at all, like—?

00:34:45

BJD: I do sometimes. I barely can cook for myself but yeah; I do. I cook for—I haven't done something for them in a while but every—well not every—blue moon, like a couple months I might have something for them to try. But I actually got some local—local conch that I'm going to make a conch stew and give them a little bit. That's another dish you're like conch stew, but you look at an old Charleston cookbooks that was bit. Now people look at it like oh conch. But I love it, so—. Yeah, but I try to but it doesn't happen often; it doesn't happen often at all.

00:35:20

SW: Will you talk a little bit about conch stew like those suckers kind of look like aliens a little bit.

00:35:24

BJD: They're not the prettiest thing in the world but they taste good. And conch stew is one of those old-time dishes that you know if you don't have family that was raised on the Sea Islands like a James Island and Johns Island, a lot of people are like conch; what is that? I took some conch to the kids at the high school the other day and they were just looking at me like ugh. And then there were a few of them like oh my granny eats this and she made it for me and I love it.

00:35:45

That's the connections that a lot of the youth don't have to the elders. Some of them don't even know their own parents. So we have to make sure that we keep the village alive and keep everybody in the same page and knowing that the indigenous cuisine and the people who came before you to allow you to be in this position that you are and respect the position that you are in because a lot of people suffered so you can be out here. So—so yeah; I guess I kind of got off the wayside about the conch stew but yeah that's one of those things, so yes. Conch stew is a good dish. You can do it however you like—have it over rice though; you got to have rice.

00:36:25

SW: Kate do you have any questions?

00:36:27

SW: I just have one. And it's kind of redundant. You've already talked about it a little bit but I think it's important. So talk to somebody like on the West Coast who has never been here before and introduce again what is Gullah food. And talk about sort of the distinguishing characteristics of it.

00:36:47

BJD: Gullah food is a lot of one-pot cooking. It's very—I mean you—if you go to West Africa and then you came to Charleston and you came and ate at—at an African American house you'd be like wow. This reminds me of food back home. Actually this girl from Liberia tasted some food I cooked the other day and she's like you—you've been to Liberia? And I was like no. And she was like you—we're so similar. I'm like yeah because a lot of us came from the same place. So Gullah food is you know very land-rich, very vegetable-oriented, seafood-oriented. It's basically Caribbean, West African influence with of course the sprinkle of the French and the English and the Indian but it's a very culturally rich cuisine, a lot of vegetables. It's just from the land and from the sea.

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I will say also if a person from California came here and you know from the California diet and they came here and ate they would love it especially if it's done correctly, if it's not—the vegetables are not hammered and it is cooked perfectly like my grandmother used to do, they will love the food here. I mean it's good food.

00:38:02

SW: And then just one other part of that. If you'll again explain to somebody who is not familiar with this area where—where you grew up in relation to Charleston and what that land is like and how that influenced the food of that place.

00:38:16

BJD: Well for us being from Charleston like we would always say like if you're from—I mean of course you know I'm from James Island, well I'm from Daniel Island, I'm from Mount

Pleasant, it's all Charleston. When I hear the accent it's local. And that could be here from to Beaufort, but it's—what was the—?

00:38:33

SW: Well so like where you grew up in relation to Charleston and how that land and space influenced the food of that place.

00:38:43

BJD: Well it's basically from the—I mean farm fresh. You know Charleston is a beautiful city. You can hop over a bridge and be in the country—excuse me, the island is a country, you know which is the country land in like 10 minutes. Hop over the bridge again and you're in the city. So it's like that whole balance of city, land, ocean, and it makes kind of a mesh of just a beautiful cuisine, you know. Charleston is a perfect mix. You can live in a city, hop on a bridge, and in 10—15 minutes be in the—on an island in the country with woods and deer and snakes. So yeah; it's—it's a great balance.

00:39:25

So it's the hardest city to appreciate. You got to know people to really take you around and show you the—the true roots of the city. And once you learn the true roots of Charleston you wouldn't—you wouldn't want to leave especially if you make good money.

00:39:37

SW: If you were to take us around and show us your true roots of Charleston where would you take us?

00:39:42

BJD: Oh we'd go to Johns Island, James Island, we would go places—I mean there's—Charleston, the whole history of the city is big but there's only—there's some of it you don't see anymore, like downtown. There's so much culture with the Gullah Geechee, but you don't see it anymore, but you go to places like James Island on Solegry Road where the movie *Glory* is based off, the history out there the guy is still catching the oysters and still foraging his orange trees galore and pecan trees and all this wild edible forage(able) items, it's—it's beautiful.

00:40:13

So I would take you there and maybe go out to McClellanville, out to Edisto Island where some folks are still speaking pure Gullah, yeah. You have to—it's funny; you come to downtown Charleston but I tell people when you come to downtown Charleston and you access locals like that ain't Charleston, so that's downtown—I mean yeah it's the city but it's not Charleston. You got to go to the outskirts, Ravenel, Hollywood, Edisto. Those are the places where you know we say it's local. I'm not saying downtown is not local; it's just not what it used to be.

00:40:45

You got to come to Charleston and get on the outside of the city limits to really get a feel of the true Charlestonian.

00:40:54

SW: How are we doing?

00:40:56

SW: Good; I think we're good, yeah.

00:40:57

SW: BJ is there anything else you want to add that we didn't ask you or you think is important for people to know about your work or the Low Country or where you're from?

00:41:07

BJD: Hmm; I can say www.chefbjdennis—www.chefbenjamindennis.com. [*Laughs*] No, nothing really; I think—I think y'all hit it—all great questions, yeah.

00:41:17

SW: You're good at talking about what you do.

00:41:19

BJD: Well I guess I'm—like I say I'm passionate about it, so—.

00:41:22

SW: Yeah; it comes through in the way that yo speak about it.

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BJD: Thank y'all.

00:41:26

SW: We really appreciate you taking the time to do this because I know you're a busy guy.

00:41:29

BJD: Oh the rest of my evening I'm going to relax, so it's all good. And this is relaxing for me.

00:41:35

SW: Good.

00:41:36

BJD: So thank y'all.

00:41:36

SW: Thank you.

00:41:39

BJD: I'm sorry; my shoes might be stinky too—. [*Laughs*]

00:41:41

SW: No.

00:41:41

[End BJ Dennis Interview]