



Denise Ravenel

Hollywood, SC

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Date: June 12, 2023

Location: Hollywood, SC

Interviewer: Stephanie Burt

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: 23 minutes

Project: Chewies, Not Charleston Chews: Four Chewie Bakers of the South Carolina Lowcountry

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Stephanie Burt: This is Stephanie Burt. It is June 12, 2023, and this is an Oral History Project oral history interview for The Southern Foodways Alliance taking place in Hollywood, South Carolina, close to Edisto Island. So, I am sitting with...

Denise Ravenel: Denise Ravenel.

Stephanie Burt: And Denise Ravenel, how old are you?

Denise Ravenel: I'm 50 years old.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, and how long have you been a cook?

Denise Ravenel: I would say for the past 23 years.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, so in your 20s.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: And I am correct in assuming that you do not commercially sell chewies, right?

Denise Ravenel: Correct.

Stephanie Burt: But your recipe is in that book. Will you tell us the name of that book?

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Denise Ravenel: The name of the book that my recipe is in is called *The Gullah Geechee Home Cooking: Recipes from the Matriarch of Edisto Island*, Emily Meggett.

Stephanie Burt: And what is your relation to Emily Meggett?

Denise Ravenel: I'm Emily Meggett's oldest granddaughter.

Stephanie Burt: Excellent, and in that book, she provides you credit for her chewies recipe, right?

Denise Ravenel: Correct.

Stephanie Burt: Yes. Now, do you call them Charleston chewies or just chewies?

Denise Ravenel: I call them chewies.

Stephanie Burt: Okay. Do you consider yourself more of a cook or a baker? Which part do you like more?

Denise Ravenel: I consider myself a cook 100% of the time and a baker probably 75% of the time. [both laugh]

Stephanie Burt: Okay, so can you briefly explain to us your relationship cooking with Miss Emily? Because I know that was a way that you really spent time with her.

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Denise Ravenel: Yes. From an early age—I would say at the age of 10, I would pinpoint it there—I would always watch my grandmother in the kitchen as she would cook, and I saw that it was an art for her, so therefore I got interested because I'm like, "Every time I look, my grandmom's in the kitchen cooking something, and it's always delicious." So, I decided that I'm going to just be her little shadow, her footsteps, so I would walk around behind her. She would

say, “Get this, get that.” I'm like, “How much do I need of this? How much do I need of that?” “Don't worry about how much you need. Just bring it to me and I'll do the judgment”—by her feel and taste and, you know, how she would do the stuff with the spoon. If it came back too fast to her, it wasn't enough. If it came back just right, then that was enough of the ingredients that she needed.

Stephanie Burt: Hmm.

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Yeah, so I just took her lead and then I started adding my little extras to it, and then we would compete and compare, and that's how we did it.

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. And you, at one point, didn't you drive to cook with her every day from this area?

Denise Ravenel: Yes, I did. It was like her mission project, and she always told me that, “I want you to take my lead, and this is how you give back to people, and show them...” She says, “You don't always have to give a person money, but,” she says that, “you can show them love and attention by just taking them something good that you made and because you put all your love into it. So, therefore when they're eating it, they would taste the love that's being spread from you to them.”

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Stephanie Burt: Do you believe that?

Denise Ravenel: I believe it, because I've cooked several dishes, like at a rush, and when I went to taste it I was like, "Geez, this tastes like nothing," [laughs] so therefore I wouldn't give it to anyone. I would throw it away and start all over, and take my time, and put the love in it that she always taught me how to do.

Stephanie Burt: Okay. When we come to chewies, what—before you started making them yourself, who made the best chewies in your estimation in your community?

Denise Ravenel: I would say my cousin Shirley Washington made the best chewies. At first she wouldn't give up her recipe, and I would nag her all the time. I was like, "Can you fix me some chewies?" She said, "Sure I'll fix it for you. When are you going to pick it up?" I would go pick it up, and I was like, "Well, are you ever going to give me the recipe?" She says, "One day, but I'm not going to give it to you now."

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So, I went from experimenting and says, "Well, maybe I taste a little bit of this in hers, and I taste a little bit of that in hers," and then I would make it. I was like, "Yeah, but it's still just not right as to what she would put in hers." So then I just waited and waited, and eventually she gave me her recipe.

Stephanie Burt: And that, is that the recipe that you use?

Denise Ravenel: In the book? No. The recipe that I use in the book, I got it from my husband's aunt, Margaret Noble. She would do it, and actually she didn't know I was jotting down what she was putting in it, because she was making it for a family function, so every time

she put something in, I wrote it down. I'm like, "Okay, she did a little bit of this, a little bit of that." And she also would put raisins in hers.

Stephanie Burt: Raisins?! I haven't heard this variation.

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Denise Ravenel: Yeah, she would put raisins in it, and she would put coconut in it. So, I was like, "Well, I'm not a raisin fan, so I know I'm not going to put that in there; and I like coconut, but I don't think I like it that much to put it in chewies for myself, so I won't do the coconut." So, I just did a variation, and then I just put in the book what I would use when I did it at the house for myself.

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. And so, that recipe that I—that you just showed me, there was one that was printed, correct?

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: One of the ones that you used as a reference, and it's called Chinese Chews.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: Now have you heard them called that before?

Denise Ravenel: No, I didn't until Corey's, his aunt, Margaret Noble, that's what she said it was called, Chinese chewies. And I often wonder what was the connection with the Chinese, why she would call it Chinese chewies, and I guess it's because of the coconut and the raisins.

I'm not sure, but that was—that's just my assumption.

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Stephanie Burt: Right, right. And then this other recipe...

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: Was from...

Denise Ravenel: Shirley. We call her Shirley, but her name is Christine Washington.

Stephanie Burt: Okay. And then you adapted yours from all of those.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: Now, what makes an excellent chewie in your opinion?

Denise Ravenel: I think the more nuts you put in it, it makes it delicious.

Stephanie Burt: Yours calls for a lot of nuts. I believe it's three cups, correct?

Denise Ravenel: Yes, that's correct.

Stephanie Burt: And this is the only recipe that I'm able to discuss in this oral history project because no one else is talking about the recipe. So, three cups is a lot.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: And is it always pecans for you?

Denise Ravenel: No, you can use walnuts. I like the pecans. My grandmother loved the

pecans in it. We've done it several times with the walnuts, but she says, "Nah, I think the pecans outweighs the walnuts."

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But it's to whatever your liking is. If you like walnuts, put the walnuts in; and if you like the pecans, put that in there as well.

Stephanie Burt: What is a big mistake? What's a common mistake when a chewie isn't good?

Denise Ravenel: Sometimes you can put too much of the oil, the butter, and I think it will make it a little more softer, and it's not as firm as it should be. And some people told me that what they did was they did a mixture of oil and the butter, so they didn't come out the right way.

Stephanie Burt: So, it really needs to be—will you list the ingredients in your chewies?

Denise Ravenel: Okay. The ingredients for my chewie is, you use a three-fourths cups of butter. It could be one-and-one-half stick of butter, which equals to 170 grams. I prefer unsalted butter, but some people like salted, so it's up to you.

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Three cups of packed light brown or dark sugar, which is, it could be the Dixie sugar or the Domino's sugar.

Stephanie Burt: Those are your favorite brands?

Denise Ravenel: Yes. You use three large eggs; you have to have that beaten. Then you use

one-and-one-half teaspoon of vanilla extract, three cups of pecans chopped, or it could be whole, it depends on your liking of the nuts. Three cups of self-rising flour, and one-fourth cup of confectionate [confectioners'] sugar, and you put the confectionate [confectioners'] sugar on it once you've baked it.

Stephanie Burt: Right, and it has and it has to cool enough.

Denise Ravenel: It has to cool, yes.

Stephanie Burt: Because that sugar will melt.

Denise Ravenel: It'll melt, yes.

Stephanie Burt: I noticed that when I made my mistake. [laughs]

Denise Ravenel: But it's still good though.

Stephanie Burt: It is still good. So, when you taught this to Miss Emily, can you walk me through that process?

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Because she was the matriarch, so she didn't get a lot of newer recip—well, she got some recipes, but not usually from her granddaughter, so will you talk to me about that process?

Denise Ravenel: Well, when I tried, my first encounter of teaching Grandmama how to do the chewies, she was like, “No I wouldn't do that. I would put this first.” I was like, “Okay Grandmama, you gotta listen to me and follow my lead [both laugh] on making the chewies.” So, I told her, I said—she's always a person to preheat the oven, of course, so I was like, “Okay, we

can preheat the oven while we do our little mixture.” So, she was like, “What we gonna do first?” I says, “What I usually do first is I put the eggs, the butter, and I would beat that first with the brown sugar.

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And then once that comes down to a nice little beating or mixture,” I says, “then we will go in and add”—but she would call it “fold”—“you will fold in the flour.” So, you take the little sifter, sometimes you'll use a sifter, and if not I'll just use the regular measuring cup, and I'll put some in, and I'll mix that in, and then I'll add more until all of the three cups is in there and blended together. And then we would add the nuts. So, our first encounter—well, I had the chopped nuts, so of course my grandma thought it wasn't chopped fine enough for her, so she took out her little grinder and she chopped them up even finer. So, I was like, “Well, we're not really going to taste this thing, Grandmama.” I said, “This is going to be all—” She says, “But that's how I want it.” So I says, “Okay, it's fine.” So she grinded up a little bit more, put it in there, and then she says, “Hmm, you said three cups. Let's add a little bit more.” So, then we added a little more.

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And she says, “I think it's going to be perfect now.” So, then we put it in the oven and we let it baked, and then we took it out and she was under the assumption, like you were, to go ahead and put the confectionate [confectioners'] sugar on the top. I says, “No, no, no. We have to let it cool down just a little, and then we'll put it on there, and then,” I said, “we can cut it when it's warm, or we can wait until it's cooled off completely and do the cutting.” So, she was like, “Yeah, let's cut it when it's warm,” ‘cause she wanted to really taste what it was like at being warm versus

chilled, you know?

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. And then you ended up keepin' it at three cups.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: Yes, and keepin' the nuts a little less fine, right?

Denise Ravenel: Fine, yes.

Stephanie Burt: So, what attracted you to making these? Because this is a—we'll talk in a minute about the dessert itself, but you as a baker, what was exciting for you to make?

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Denise Ravenel: Well, what was exciting? It was the taste and how I saw people's reaction to when they just take the first bite. It was like, "Oh my gosh, you have to have to have more. I have to have more." So, once I watched my husband's aunt, Margaret Noble, do it, and then my cousin, Shirley, would fix it, and I would go to her house, but always when it's at the end when she's ready to put in a box for me. I just—and hers was so delicious, I says, "I have to learn how to master making this chewie."

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm, And it is about the technique.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: It has a very unusual technique as—well, not unusual, but a very specific technique.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: So, okay. So, you figured that out. Do you—when did you encounter chewies? At what kind of celebrations and occasions?

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Denise Ravenel: Chewies was usually a dessert that you have, like, for a Sunday family dinner, or if you would go to someone house for, like, a birthday drop-in, or any type of celebration, chewies, from as far as I can remember, was always one of the desserts that was on the table.

Stephanie Burt: Every time.

Denise Ravenel: Every time.

Stephanie Burt: Now, this isn't a quiz; it's just thinking about oral history. Do you—when you think about mastering chewies, you must have thought about them as being part of a tradition, right? Since everybody made them. Why do you think they are part of the Gullah Geechee food culture?

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Denise Ravenel: I think it's a part of the Gullah Geechee food culture because of the sweetness, the texture, and just the type of food in which we share our love. With the Gullah Geechee foods, we are known to always have rice or okra or gumbo, so then from what I gather and how I see it and my grandmother relayed it to me, she says, "Whenever we had a dinner, we always had something sweet that will make a person's lasting impression like, 'Oh my gosh, when's the next function or when's the next gathering?'" So, it's been around forever, for as long

as I know, and I enjoyed it, and I was happy to be able to share it with my grandmother even though she would do—she didn't know how to make it, and when I taught her how to make it, she would always says, “Well, come over here. I want you to make this at my house.” So then we would take it to her little old folks—well, she called them her young friends, but they were people as old as her that we would take it to for their desserts, along with whatever meal she prepared for them.

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Stephanie Burt: Now, they are a pantry item, so is there any kind of history that you know of—you know, like, it makes sense that okra is a dish of the Gullah Geechee because it, okra—I mean, gumbo and okra, same word. And then, you know, fish makes sense; red rice makes sense. But is there any way that, besides that culture of finishing off with something sweet, that the ingredients themselves are important? Doesn't have to be, I just am asking.

Denise Ravenel: Yeah, I would say it is. From the Gullah Geechee culture, I would say it's like a twist to it. Whenever you do or you cook something, something from your ancestors' history or past will always come up, even if it's just down to making a cornbread.

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It's something with our cooking that we just—red beans, and rice, for example—somebody's going to have something that reflects back to our ancestors and what they ate coming up.

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. Okay, now. Now that the recipe has been published, will you talk a little bit about your new role since Miss Emily's passing, in this world that she opened up

for her family?

Denise Ravenel: Well, I wouldn't call it a new role for me. My grandmother taught me missionary work, so I would give her all the credit for that because she always did things for people and didn't expect to be recognized or paid for it.

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So, before she passed away, for the last year and a half, I told her, I says, “Grandmama,” I said, “Guess what I'm going to do.” And she was like, “What?” I says, “I'm gonna go out and feed the homeless.” I says, “I'm gonna to try to do it once a week; if not once a week, twice a month.” And she says, “Well, how you plannin' on doin' that?” I says, “Well,” I says, “I don't know how I plan to do it,” I said, [laughs] “but it's gonna get done.” And she said, “Hmm. I see. I feed the elderly, ‘my little young people,’ ” that I recalled she calls them. She says, “So, now you're going to go and venture out to the homeless people.” She says, “Well, what I want you to do is to be careful.” She says, “I understand your mission, so just be careful.”

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So, the first time that I went out to feed the homeless, of course I was like, “Oh my gosh, do I really wanna do this?” And then I was layin' in the bed, got up at 3:00 that morning, I said—I told my husband—I says, “Well, I'm going to do some mission work today,” and I got up and started cooking. And that first day, I went out and I fed 250 people—

Stephanie Burt: Wow! Wow...

Denise Ravenel: —that day, And it broke my heart. And I called and told my grandmother,

I said, "At the end," I says, "a young lady pulled up with a car full of children, and I didn't have nothing for them because I ran out of food." And I told her, I says, "I was—it made me feel sad." So, what I did was I told the young lady, I says, "Follow me to the nearest restaurant, and I'll make sure you and your family get something to eat." She says, "Well, we can just get something from McDonald's, or Burger King, or we can go to the Church's Chicken, wherever you want to go."

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I said, "No, you choose the restaurant. I'll meet you there, and I'll pay for y'all for something to eat," and that's what I did. And I told my grandmother what happened. She was like, "Oh, you're just like me, because I would have done the same thing." I said, "Well, I learned mission work from you, so I want not only you to be proud of me, but I want God to be pleased with what I'm doing as well." Because there are so many people out there. I'm happy and privileged. I can come home, turn the light switch on, open the refrigerator. I have more than what I need, but there's always someone that doesn't have what I have, that's less fortunate. So, I just try to continue her dreams and desires, that she loves to cook for people, put love in it, and that's what I do.

Stephanie Burt: And have you heard any feedback on your recipe of chewies from public that you don't know?

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Denise Ravenel: Yes, I've heard several from the ladies down at Buxton Books. When Grandmama was there to sign books with Toni Tipton-Martin and Jonathan Green that Sunday

we were there, the young lady behind the counter, she was like, "Ooh, I made your chewies, but before I put them out, I want you to taste it." [Stephanie laughs] So I says, "Okay, I'll taste it." She says, "Please don't tell me I did it wrong." I says, "No, actually it's perfect." I said, "You did a wonderful job." So then she made some more and took it to a friend, And her friend called, and they did a three way call—I can't remember her name right now, but she says, "Oh, those chewies are delicious. You have a hit girl!" I says, "Well, I'm glad somebody's enjoying my recipe." I says, "I don't have a problem." I said, "If you want me to taste it for you, I'll do that."

Stephanie Burt: Mm-hmm. Great.

Denise Ravenel: And then you told me also that you enjoy it yourself.

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Stephanie Burt: That's right. These are my chewies. [Denise laughs] I'm claiming them. I give you credit for sure, and miss Emily for sure, but my variation of your chewies is: everything is the same, but I don't chop the nuts because I like that big pecan flavor.

Denise Ravenel: Yes.

Stephanie Burt: And when you cut 'em, they chop up.

Denise Ravenel: Yeah, that's correct.

Stephanie Burt: And how big do you like to cut your squares?

Denise Ravenel: Not so big. Medium size.

Stephanie Burt: So, like one inch by one inch, maybe?

Denise Ravenel: One inch, yes. Yes.

Stephanie Burt: Okay. Okay, good. Is there anything else you want to say about this very particular baked good?

Denise Ravenel: No, just if you were to purchase my grandmother's book, make the chewies.

Stephanie Burt: That's great.

Denise Ravenel: I think it'll be a hit for your dessert table. [laughs]

Stephanie Burt: All right, and will you once again state your name for me, just for this audio?

Denise Ravenel: Denise Ravenel.

Stephanie Burt: Great, and I'm going to record a few seconds of silence.

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Oh, one other thing. Did you grow up on Edisto, or here in Hollywood?

Denise Ravenel: I grew up on Edisto, less than three miles from my grandmother's house.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, so you grew up on Edisto Island. Okay. And all those people that you spoke about, they were on Edisto as well?

Denise Ravenel: No. Christine Washington, she lives in Charleston, and Margaret Noble, she lives in Ravenel, but she's has since passed as well.

Stephanie Burt: Okay, great. Thank you, Denise.

Denise Ravenel: Thank you.

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[End]