



**Donni Choate**  
**Cajun Claws - Abbeville, Louisiana**

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Date: February 18, 2020  
Location: Cajun Claws - Abbeville, Louisiana  
Interviewer: Rien Fertel  
Transcription: Technitype Transcripts  
Length: 1 hour, 5 minutes  
Project: Sustainable South Louisiana

**Rien Fertel:** This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Tuesday, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020, almost 4:30 in the afternoon, and I am at Cajun Claws, where I've grown up eating most of my life, in Abbeville, Louisiana. And please introduce yourself.

[0:00:20.2]

**Donni Choate:** Donni Choate, born and raised in Abbeville, Louisiana, owner of Cajun Claws in Abbeville.

[0:00:27.5]

**Rien Fertel:** And what is your birth date, if you don't mind sharing?

[0:00:29.3]

**Donni Choate:** 8/8/[19]59.

[0:00:31.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Can you tell me, I want to ask about growing up in Abbeville, what it was like back in the day. It's about twenty-minutes, half-hour drive, depending on if you're speeding or not, from Lafayette. What was Abbeville like in the [19]60s, [19]70s, growing up here?

[0:00:50.1]

**Donni Choate:** It was traditional. It was kind of like places—a lot of eating places were here at that time, and a lot of people out in the streets and moving around, and a lot of family-oriented places, and a lot of stuff going on in the parks and recreation. That's where we spent a lot of our time when we were young.

[0:01:17.9]

**Rien Fertel:** Lafayette is known as it has the oil and gas industry of South Louisiana has always been headquartered there. What was Abbeville known for, or is it still known for? Was it fishing? Was it farming? What was going on here?

[0:01:35.8]

**Donni Choate:** Well, in the [19]70s and [19]80s, they had an oil boom, and a lot of that was going on as well in Lafayette, and also they always had a good fishing industry going, shrimping, crabbing, and crawfish was starting to get the wheel rolling on that a little bit, but in the [19]60s, it was there but it wasn't real commercialized. It was just a few people doing it, and then as it went on, it got more commercialized.

[0:02:11.8]

**Rien Fertel:** So growing up, especially when you were younger, do you remember eating crawfish? And where would you eat it?

[0:02:16.6]

**Donni Choate:** The only time that—what would happen, I remember as a kid, I was probably eight years old or maybe ten years old and I remember friends, not my friends, but my sisters’ and brothers’ friends, which they were older than I was, probably ten years older, and their friends were passing at home and say, “The crawfish across from the road in Pecan Island.” And they would scoop up, they’d just grab—immediately grab trashcans and jump in the back of trucks and get gloves and stuff, and everyone would go down to Pecan Island, and crawfish were actually just crossing over the road for whatever reason, and I’m sure they had something behind it. Might’ve been at the time where they were going through their cycle, because they do that in the ponds.

And they would scoop them up, and when they would scoop them up, they’d put them in those trashcans, but myself, my father would build a fire at home and put a huge metal tub out there, and while they were out grabbing them, they would take these crawfish, when they’d get back with them, they wouldn’t even rinse them hardly, basically, they’d just put them in the pot and kind of like scald them up. It would never really come to a complete boil. And season them with whatever they had and really didn’t know—it’s not like it is today. Then all the neighborhood would come over and bring tables and chairs or whatever, they’d just net them out of that tub and just dump them on tables, and the whole neighborhood would eat crawfish.

[0:03:58.3]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[0:03:58.9]

**Donni Choate:** But that's about as much as I remember as even in the [19]60s and the [19]70s.

[0:04:05.7]

**Rien Fertel:** Tell me about your father. What did he do and what was his name?

[0:04:08.7]

**Donni Choate:** His name was Jimmy Choate, and actually that's his violin right there. He was a musician.

[0:04:15.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Tell me about that.

[0:04:17.9]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah. He had his own band and he moved up and down the road a little bit, played a lot in Texas and Louisiana, and he had a country swing band.

[0:04:26.2]

**Rien Fertel:** What was the name of the band?

[0:04:28.0]

**Donni Choate:** I'm not exactly—I know it, but they had a few names. I know they were the Melody Aces at one time, and I'm not exactly sure. They might even have it on the picture, but I'm not exactly sure.

[0:04:49.6]

**Rien Fertel:** And his name was Jim?

[0:04:51.2]

**Donni Choate:** His name was Jimmy Choate, James Choate, James Marvin Choate. Right.

[0:04:58.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Did he sing in French, in Cajun French?

[0:05:02.2]

**Donni Choate:** He did, he did, he did, and he learned a lot of it from my mother, because she was a LeBlanc and she kind of passed it down to him. No, he sang a *lot* of Cajun. Actually, he had some Cajun songs that he recorded and made some records with it. Actually, a story about—we bought a jukebox probably twenty or thirty years later from, actually, Mike Stansbury from Lafayette, and we brought the jukebox home and had some of my Daddy's records on the jukebox, so it was pretty cool.

[0:05:40.1]

**Rien Fertel:** Cool. And what was your mom's name?

[0:05:41.1]

**Donni Choate:** Her name was Janie LeBlanc Choate, and she was a niece of Dudley J. LeBlanc.

[0:05:52.3]

**Rien Fertel:** Who was—tell us about Dudley LeBlanc. I didn't know you were related. That's amazing.

[0:05:55.7]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, yeah. He was the Hadacol man.

[0:05:58.5]

**Rien Fertel:** Right.

[0:05:59.3]

**Donni Choate:** And that was in the family somewhere along the line. I'm not sure exactly. My brother would know more of the story. But he was part of the family somewhere along in there. But she was LeBlanc, raised LeBlanc amongst all of them, so, yeah, it was pretty cool. But I was too young to really remember a lot about them.

[0:06:22.8]

**Rien Fertel:** So you mentioned the crawfish industry started to change in the [19]70s. What was changing? Was it farming or restaurants or both?

[0:06:31.3]

**Donni Choate:** Well, I think what was happening, the spillway was the first—in the Spillway they first started getting a little bit of crawfish, and they were close to the city, New Orleans. It's a little hop, skip, and jump, so a lot of those trucks was catching them in the spillway and they started—

[0:06:52.8]

**Rien Fertel:** Like fishing for them, you mean?

[0:06:53.5]

**Donni Choate:** Right, and then the trucks, what was the delivery people, or even the fishermen, were probably loading them on the back of their trucks and running into the city and then kind of created a little market for them. And then as it went, the market kind of started to build some, and then it started progressing into the ponds and actually down here. A whole bunch of fishermen claimed to be the first ones to start catching them and so forth, but I don't know exactly who started it, but I know a lot of guys down in Forked Island, some of those guys did it in the late [19]60s or maybe even mid to late [19]60s. I'm not exactly sure. But it was just inspired by the Spillway crawfish, and they started getting the market going and then it commercialized into what it is today.

[0:07:51.6]

**Rien Fertel:** So from wild to farmed crawfish.



[0:07:53.5]

**Donni Choate:** Right. Exactly.

[0:07:55.8]

**Rien Fertel:** So these men who claim to be the first crawfish farmers, were they rice farmers? Was it that same cycle?

[0:08:05.9]

**Donni Choate:** I'm sure they were. I'm not exactly sure if they had put it together that it was the rice is what they needed for the food for the crawfish. Maybe they got some and put it in their fields and stocked them. I'm not quite sure exactly how it just evolved and how it really took off, but, yeah, I would think that most of them would have been rice farmers, because all the guys that claim to be the ones that was the first ones to do it, they all were farmers, rice farmers.

[0:08:43.1]

**Rien Fertel:** And do you remember the first time you saw crawfish in a restaurant?

[0:08:45.7]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, I would think in probably the early to mid-[19]70s.

[0:08:55.8]

**Rien Fertel:** I've heard stories, people saying that when the first restaurants that sold crawfish or served crawfish, you'd have to eat it in a back room and they'd draw a curtain because they were considered unclean back then. It was something that you wouldn't eat in nice company. Have you heard those stories?

[0:09:18.2]

**Donni Choate:** I never did hear that story. The only thing I remember as a teenager going to Richard's Seafood Patio, and he was big, big, and he's still big now—

[0:09:28.6]

**Rien Fertel:** And that's here in Abbeville?

[0:09:30.1]

**Donni Choate:** It is. And he was one of the first ones. And I remember going there, I was about fifteen years old, going in there and actually seeing people eat crawfish.

[0:09:43.9]

**Rien Fertel:** And it was the same? It was just on trays?

[0:09:46.5]

**Donni Choate:** Sure, yeah.

[0:09:48.0]

**Rien Fertel:** So what did you do? Can you tell us maybe what you went into after school, after high school or your first jobs?

[0:09:58.6]

**Donni Choate:** I worked in the oilfield. I did carpenter work. I kind of just poked around on a bunch of different things, and then in [19]79 and [19]80, met Jodi, and Jodi's aunt and uncle got into, probably a couple years prior to that, had got into the kind of bait sales, and then it became crawfish sales. Then I went to work for him and worked for him for a couple of years. Then he put me out closer to the fishermen, which was a little further out into the rice fields and closer to those guys, and a lot of my people were coming. A lot of people that I was dealing with came from Forked Island to Mouton Cove, which was probably eight miles away from Forked Island, but a lot of those guys were coming from there and selling product to me and buying fish bait from me and stuff.

So we stayed there a couple, two or three years, and then we just decided to go to Forked Island to try to find some property there and get a little closer to the people that we were dealing with.

[0:11:24.9]

**Rien Fertel:** How far is Forked Island from where we are, from Abbeville?

[0:11:26.9]

**Donni Choate:** It's about fifteen miles, probably fifteen, sixteen miles from right here.

[0:11:30.7]

**Rien Fertel:** In what direction?

[0:11:31.7]

**Donni Choate:** It's southwest. It's actually probably—it's a little closer than halfway—probably halfway between here and Pecan Island.

[0:11:42.5]

**Rien Fertel:** And it's not a natural island or we call it an island?

[0:11:45.5]

**Donni Choate:** I think it's just called an island.

[0:11:47.0]

**Rien Fertel:** But it's wet. There's a lot of water.

[0:11:49.6]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah. Yeah, it's not far from White Lake, and it's just east of White Lake by a few miles, couple miles as the crow flies across. So, yeah.

[0:12:05.8]

**Rien Fertel:** So you were talking about after two or three years, you decided to relocate down there?

[0:12:08.9]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, we did, and we found actually an old store there and it was called—actually, it was Gaspard’s at one time, then it was Deshotel’s Grocery, so it came up for sale and we bought the store and the property, and I worked under her uncle there for a couple of years, a few years. Then he actually sold it out to Jodi and I.

But we always had good, good, big crawfish coming out of that little area, probably little five-mile radius or three- to five-mile radius, always big, beautiful crawfish. I started supplying some to Richard’s, which is one of them that I talked about. A good friend of mine at Black’s Restaurant, I sold a *lot* of crawfish to Black’s, and then there were a couple of little stops. I did actually Vernick’s, and that was another good place, Vernick’s, and then I would go to Boiling Point, Guiding Star, and Gator Cove, only with graded select crawfish. Yeah, so that’s how that pretty much started, and then I kind of got on a roll and kind of made a little circling. So just only big crawfish.

[0:13:29.2]

**Rien Fertel:** And I want to back up and just ask one question. The store, it was an actual grocery store?

[0:13:36.7]

**Donni Choate:** It was a grocery store, but as soon as we bought it—it was completely stocked—we gave all the product that was in the store away to all the locals.

[0:13:47.5]

**Rien Fertel:** Like chips and beer and canned goods.

[0:13:50.6]

**Donni Choate:** Canned goods. *Everything* was that in that store, from meat to frozen, cleaned the whole shelves out, and it gave us a good opportunity to make good with the people in that community. We suddenly became like gods, you know, and people loved us. From then, we was always fair with them, and conducted good business still till now.

[0:14:16.4]

**Rien Fertel:** So you didn't restock it? It didn't stay as a grocery? It was only—

[0:14:20.2]

**Donni Choate:** No, we didn't sell anything. We gave it all away.

[0:14:24.0]

**Rien Fertel:** It was just a place to—

[0:14:28.2]

**Donni Choate:** It was the property mainly, and then we brought crawfish out of the old store and we would stack them up on the front, out on the patio in front of the store. We did that for probably three years, I would think, a couple, two or three years. Then I built a big warehouse on the side and kind of went forward from there.

[0:14:55.9]

**Rien Fertel:** So is there a reason why Forked Island crawfish were bigger or more select? Have you ever figured?

[0:15:04.5]

**Donni Choate:** A lot of the ponds that I get big crawfish from are kind of—a lot of them consistently have those crawfish, and only thing I can see, it's got a lot to do with the land. I'm not sure exactly what it is. You're closer to the water table. The survival rate is pretty good. If you have drought and the water table's not as deep, you know, they don't have to go as far to get to the water. In the off-seasons, they could survive, whereas some in other areas might not because they couldn't reach the water.

[0:15:45.7]

**Rien Fertel:** And these ponds that you took the crawfish out of in Forked Island, were they rice fields?

[0:15:52.4]

**Donni Choate:** A lot of them were rice field crawfish, right, but they did have pasture-land crawfish.

[0:15:59.1]

**Rien Fertel:** Can you explain that?

[0:15:59.7]

**Donni Choate:** Pasture land is just crawfish that might have had cattle that was raised on the land and leveed it off and became crawfish ponds and kind of just whatever grows in there wild, grows in those ponds wild. They produce crawfish and they produce good-quality crawfish, and I think it's because the habitat's kind of natural. Still today I buy some out of a lot of pasture-land crawfish that's big, beautiful crawfish, and they actually get darker because the water in pasture land stays clear. It stays more clear than rice field. The water gets a muddy color, kind of that chocolate look, and it kind of like shades the water, and then the crawfish, they kind of get a greenish color where the sun, but in the pasture crawfish where that water's clear, that little sunlight puts that little dark shell on that crawfish from the sunlight, not necessarily that they're old and hard and no quality. It's just that sunlight just darkens that shell.

[0:17:17.0]

**Rien Fertel:** Like a suntan.

[0:17:17.9]

**Donni Choate:** Just like a suntan.

[0:17:19.2]

**Rien Fertel:** I didn't know that. And is there a difference in taste too?

[0:17:22.1]



**Donni Choate:** Once they're purged, it's like they pretty much all taste the same, but I would think that you wouldn't really know a difference. Yeah, I would think that there's not much of a difference in taste.

[0:17:44.8]

**Rien Fertel:** So how much acreage, how large were these fields at the largest that you were taking crawfish from?

[0:17:50.0]

**Donni Choate:** Actually—you talking about the rice field and pasture land together?

[0:17:59.8]

**Rien Fertel:** Mm-hm.

[0:18:00.0]

**Donni Choate:** Well, actually, Forked Island, the community, is a little small community and a bunch of small landowners, and they do have a lot of land in the swampy areas and stuff, but we didn't really get too, too much crawfish, but one year, a couple of years we got them out of—they were using them really to reseed ponds, but it's a lot of smaller acreage and it's not as big now compared to what it is, compared to what the industry is now. People now do—it's nothing for people to have 1,000 and 2,000 acres, and down there it's a lot of small ponds which are more manageable. They could kind of move their water around and pump on them easier, drop water, raise it back up, and actually make flow and make the water move around a little bit, which is always good and it helps the

crawfish. When you can't move the water, the crawfish feel like they might be a little sick, and they won't eat. They won't. They're not thriving to eat as much. When you can move that water around and make current, it's like they healthy and they want to eat. When it's like that, it's a better chance that they'll grow.

[0:19:21.9]

**Rien Fertel:** Can you talk about how you got the crawfish out of the water, whether it was in traps or you had a crawfish boat, like how you actually farmed them?

[0:19:28.9]

**Donni Choate:** Sure. Well, actually, it's originally called a crawfish combine, and it's just some are front wheel, some are rear wheel, and it just tracks along and pulls with that front or rear wheel, and you just pass along the side of the trap and pick the trap up and put one down and dump it out and rebait it and go do the process over and over.

[0:19:58.7]

**Rien Fertel:** And how much crawfish would fit, on average, in a trap, whether pounds or individual crawfish?

[0:20:06.2]

**Donni Choate:** Well, I seen them, on a good average, it's probably a pound, but there's a lot of people do a half a pound or a quarter pound. Some people do a tenth of a pound.

Some people do five pounds. But if I have to give you just an answer, I would say a pound to the trap is a good yield and something worth fishing for. Anything less—but anything more is always good. But I seen one guy catch as much as ten pounds in a trap.

[0:20:40.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow. What would you bait the traps with?

[0:20:42.5]

**Donni Choate:** What they bait them with is fish bait, and the most popular bait is actually pogie fish. It draws the crawfish to the trap and they get to eat on it pretty good, but that's what draws them the most, a fresh bait. And pogie fish is the best to use.

[0:21:05.9]

**Rien Fertel:** And how long did you farm crawfish down there at Forked Island?

[0:21:10.1]

**Donni Choate:** I don't farm them at all.

[0:21:12.0]

**Rien Fertel:** Well, how long did—well, what did you do down there?

[0:21:14.1]

**Donni Choate:** I'm a broker.

[0:21:15.1]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, you broker—okay. So you were the middle man between the farmers and the restaurants or the farmers and the—

[0:21:22.9]

**Donni Choate:** Farmers and actually the distributors.

[0:21:26.3]

**Rien Fertel:** The distributors. Okay. How long did you do that for?

[0:21:29.2]

**Donni Choate:** This is my thirty-fourth year.

[0:21:31.6]

**Rien Fertel:** So you still do it?

[0:21:31.6]

**Donni Choate:** Oh, yeah. I did it today.

[0:21:34.9]

**Rien Fertel:** [Laughter] Oh, you did it—that’s what you were doing today?

[0:21:37.0]

**Donni Choate:** That’s why I had to arrange this meeting late as it is, because actually a lot of stuff going on. Yeah, I wish I could’ve met you a lot earlier.

[0:21:37.0]

**Rien Fertel:** No, no, that’s all right. I want to—one of my questions—no, tell me about the brokering. Before you had the restaurant and you were just doing brokering, what did a day in your life look like, like just the schedule, the busyness.

[0:22:01.4]

**Donni Choate:** Without the restaurant?

[0:22:02.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah.

[0:22:03.9]

**Donni Choate:** Actually, it was a hell of a lot easier. When the restaurant opened, it changed a lot, just to make it all go and make it happen. But, say, on a normal day, you get up at a certain time, and at 9:30, 10:00 o’clock, crawfish’ll start coming in out of the fields, and you would buy them—because they got buyers on every corner, just about

every corner now. There's a bunch of buyers. Back then, they had five in the parish. So, yeah, you'd buy an abundance of them, you'd buy a lot. You'd buy a *lot* of sacks of crawfish. And so we'd sit there from, say, 9:30. As early as 9:00, you might get a small fisherman coming in because it didn't take him long to run a small pond. And then we'd sit there till 3:30, and then we'd load a couple trucks and we'd kind of sell the locals, the bigger stuff to locals because it didn't get further. It stayed close. A lot of it just stayed in the parish.

Then a lot of stuff was picked up at 3:30, 4:00 o'clock by the distributors, and they would bring them back to their plants and organize trucks and routes, and then the next day, they get on the road and kind of move them around.

Yeah, it was a lot easier. We have to spend way more time now. It's tedious to prep for the restaurant, and everything's prepped there, so, yeah, it's a big, big difference.

[0:23:36.3]

**Rien Fertel:** So you started brokering thirty-four years ago.

[0:23:39.7]

**Donni Choate:** I would think. I started in [19]85 or [19]80—.

[0:23:42.6]

**Rien Fertel:** How much was a sack of crawfish then, and how big is a sack?

[0:23:47.4]

**Donni Choate:** A sack is probably, on average, thirty-three to thirty-five pounds. Some of them put more. In the Spillway, they put way more in a sack.

[0:24:01.3]

**Rien Fertel:** Because they're smaller?

[0:24:01.6]

**Donni Choate:** No.

[0:24:03.3]

**Rien Fertel:** Even though it's pounds, still.

[0:24:04.1]

**Donni Choate:** No, but you could put more weight in the sack of crawfish that's smaller. When the smaller they are, yeah, you could put more in them because they actually roll up and you could just put a lot in them. But I'm not saying that the Spillway's that they're small, because they have good-quality stuff over there, too, but it seems to be where they telling us not to overload the sack and not to pack them real hard, in the Spillway they can get away with forty and forty-two pound, and I've seen them forty-five pounds. I don't know if the sacks are bigger where they get them or just what it is, because there's no way that we could even stuff forty pounds in a sack.

[0:24:52.1]

**Rien Fertel:** And do you remember what a sack would cost in [19]85, late [19]80s?

[0:24:55.4]

**Donni Choate:** I would think—I remember buying them at probably seventy-five cents a pound. I'm thinking somewhere around that, so at a dollar, I would figure \$25 a sack.

[0:25:13.6]

**Rien Fertel:** And what are we at now?

[0:25:14.6]

**Donni Choate:** Oh, it's probably, if you're buying a sack, it's going to be eighty or ninety or \$100, and that's on just a mixed-grade crawfish. If you get thirty-five and market price being at \$2, and then by the time they go on the road with them, they're 2.50, 2.75, well, the math, you do that, that's going to be eighty bucks.

[0:25:35.5]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[0:25:35.5]

**Donni Choate:** And that's just for mixed crawfish, just a straight-grade crawfish.

[0:25:40.2]



**Rien Fertel:** Not the highest, not the biggest grade.

[0:25:41.8]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah. It's just kind of like medium size, the run-of-the-mill crawfish, kind of like what they catching in the trap. If they small, then they separate it as peelers and they go to the peeling plant, or they do have people that buy them at a cheaper price and put them on buffets. Casinos do them a lot, and they're a lot cheaper and they can afford to kind of let somebody eat thirty pounds of them, without getting hit too hard. Most of them get tired of peeling them before, though.

[0:26:15.1]

**Rien Fertel:** What's the highest? Do you remember the highest it's ever been? I understand this year's pretty good because we didn't have—.

[0:26:18.8]

**Donni Choate:** I paid—I don't know if it was this year. For sure last year in January we had cold spells and price had went up to like \$4, and if you was thinking of a thirty-five, forty-pound sack, on a forty-pound sack, that's 160 bucks right there that we was paying to the fishermen. But if they thirty-five pounds, we paid 140, 150 bucks, they still had to go on the road and pay that and also collect what they made on top of that. So you probably thinking, probably at that time, and that was last year in January, you're thinking 180, 170, \$190 a sack.

[0:26:58.9]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow. You mentioned Spillway crawfish a few times. I think that's wild crawfish?

[0:27:04.0]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah.

[0:27:05.9]

**Rien Fertel:** And what's the difference between wild and farmed, either in taste or look?

[0:27:09.0]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, the taste is quite a bit different. The city *loves* Spillway crawfish.

[0:27:18.3]

**Rien Fertel:** The city? What city?

[0:27:18.3]

**Donni Choate:** New Orleans.

[0:27:20.9]

**Rien Fertel:** [Laughter] Okay. Talk about that.

[0:27:22.1]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah. That's just a common thing for us to call it "the city." That's New Orleans, because so much goes there. But, yeah, they love Spillway crawfish, and they really good, but it's quite a bit of a change from ponds and eating pond and switching over to Spillway. I don't use any Spillway. I'm not saying I never will. I tried doing them once or twice, and they were big, beautiful crawfish, just I couldn't make them taste like I needed them to taste.

[0:27:55.3]

**Rien Fertel:** What is the taste difference, you would say?

[0:27:56.6]

**Donni Choate:** I can't really recall exactly what it is. First of all, pond crawfish has yellow fat. Spillway crawfish have green fat, like a wasabi green, or just kind of a guacamole green.

[0:28:18.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Like a pea green. I know what you're talking about.

[0:28:20.3]

**Donni Choate:** But far as for the taste, you just have to experience that, because I can't put a name or a word to that. It's like maybe just woody or—I don't know what name, but it's definitely a difference.

[0:28:44.1]

**Rien Fertel:** I want to ask one more question before we get to opening the restaurant.

You mentioned Jodi, your wife. Where did y'all meet? How did y'all meet?

[0:28:52.2]

**Donni Choate:** Actually, we had a cycling crew, and Jodi and I, we would cycle around town, a lot of times late at night, and we had ten, fifteen, or twenty of us at a time, a lot of times, and we did a bunch of kid stuff, like hopping the fence in the city pool and swimming out in the middle of the night, and doing all the wild things. Yeah, we just roamed around and we'd do our thing. Yeah, I met her with some friends at her grandmother's house.

[0:29:30.2]

**Rien Fertel:** And she's from Abbeville?

[0:29:30.2]

**Donni Choate:** She is.

[0:29:33.7]

**Rien Fertel:** Is it true that she's allergic to crawfish?

[Interruption.]

[0:29:35.8]

**Donni Choate:** Actually, Jodi, she just had a reaction to them at one point, but she has an autoimmune disease, and at certain times it could affect that. We're not exactly sure, but it did happen once or twice where her body broke out pretty bad with it after being around them and eating them. She's eaten them a few times—

[Interruption.]

[0:30:22.5]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, but she's been coming with Kyle and eating maybe a half an order or less, so she's kind of getting back on it, but she's starting to find a lot of answers and she's been to a lot of doctors and she knows what she's dealing with. But she hadn't been really hit with that reaction in a while, but she's also taking a lot of different kind of medicines for her RA and a bunch of other things.

[0:30:58.6]

**Rien Fertel:** So when and why did you decide to open, or the two of you decide to open this, Cajun Claws?

[0:31:06.1]

**Donni Choate:** Okay. Actually, it was a thing—I had the product and I was supplying a lot of the people, a lot of restaurants with the product, and Jodi and I kind of discussed

about just—“We need to just boil some through a little drive-through or a little caboose kind of thing.” And then we was in a bar one night and just shooting pool and having a couple beers, and Jodi came up to me and said, “I just bought a restaurant.”

And I said, “What?!”

She said, “Yeah.” She said, “I just bought a restaurant.”

I said, “Are you crazy?”

So Cajun Claws, we bought the old building, and it was a good price, and had a lot of stuff in it and so forth, and we moved it to here and kind of just refurbished it best we could without going into too much debt. But we knew we had the product. So Jodi was always worried, “You think we could make it happen and it’s going to be busy?”

I said, “Well, Jodi, we got a good product.”

And she would ask me, “Well, how you going to boil them?”

I said, “Like we always boil them at home, and we’re going to make it our own.”

So it just kind of took off from there.

[0:32:18.6]

**Rien Fertel:** And what year was this?

[0:32:20.0]

**Donni Choate:** That was [19]96. She was pregnant, actually, for Tanner.

[0:32:25.5]

**Rien Fertel:** You have some older kids or was that your first kid?

[0:32:28.6]

**Donni Choate:** No, Kyle was born in [19]84 and Tyler in [19]89.

[0:32:35.4]

**Rien Fertel:** So what did that life look like? Y'all had a family, you had the other job, right, the brokering?

[0:32:43.8]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, always, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[0:32:45.8]

**Rien Fertel:** Was it tough? What was those first years like?

[0:32:48.8]

**Donni Choate:** Actually, it was easier then than it is now.

[0:32:55.3]

**Rien Fertel:** Why?

[0:32:55.3]

**Donni Choate:** Because I could get the product so much easier. It's just as the years go and it seems like the more commercialized it gets, it's like the product is dwindled.

[0:33:10.9]

**Rien Fertel:** Are there actually less crawfish coming out of the ponds or just more people eating it?

[0:33:14.7]

**Donni Choate:** No, it's actually the bigger ones are further apart.

[0:33:23.7]

**Rien Fertel:** The bigger select crawfish?

[0:33:24.6]

**Donni Choate:** Select crawfish. It's like they're harder to get, and I think, everybody's got their own little thing, but like I said, when those ponds are real healthy, they produce an abundance. When there's an abundance, they don't grow as big. And for whatever, they're competing for what it is that makes them grow. And people said, "Well, I got a big ol' pond full of stuff." Well, then they got plenty to eat. Well, that's always a good thing, but that's not exactly all of it. It's got a lot to do with sunlight and photosynthesis and stuff that if we knew, we'd all have big crawfish. So it has a lot of things to do with we don't exactly quite know what it is, and the professionals that go to school, even LSU, they've been thrown off their game. And they come to me a lot of times to ask me



information, and I don't quote too much stuff because as soon as you do, it's going to derail you and throw you a loop.

[0:34:29.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Right. So it's a fickle industry, is what you're saying.

[0:34:34.3]

**Donni Choate:** For sure.

[0:34:35.9]

**Rien Fertel:** So can you tell me about—well, what the restaurant—well, let me ask this: Was it always select crawfish you were selling? Was that kind of the foundational—

[0:34:45.5]

**Donni Choate:** On Saturday night, I came in with some select crawfish, maybe 300 or 400 pounds, because I bought more on Friday than I wanted to because we didn't want to tell—it was Valentine's Day, and there was some people we didn't want to tell no, and I'm not sure if we took care of everyone. But on Saturday night, I came in with three sacks of crawfish. They run them on a three-quarter-mesh bar, knocked the little ones out, and then the next ones kind of like a medium crawfish. I came in with three sacks of those, and that was the first time that I ever put a crawfish like that on the table.

[0:35:33.9]

**Rien Fertel:** Really?

[0:35:34.7]

**Donni Choate:** And I brought one sack and I drug up—I took the other two sacks and I sold them to somebody the next day.

[0:35:42.0]

**Rien Fertel:** Were you upset, or how did you feel?

[0:35:43.6]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, because of the fact that it was just discouraging to boil and send out those little things. I got too much pride to put it out. It's like that's why we're not open. I bought plenty crawfish; I just didn't buy what I needed today. I could've opened tonight, but it's just I can't open with that when you have a reputation built over so many years. And people come in and then they lift the tray up and it's such a surprise to them, like, "Wow! What's this? These people are really letting it go." And those kind of things it's hard for me to deal with. I'll flip the clock to get that product on the table, whatever it takes.

[0:36:28.7]

**Rien Fertel:** You'll tell people no, like you just did, just not open.

[0:36:32.2]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah. I got fifteen sacks in the back of the truck.

[0:36:37.1]

**Rien Fertel:** But they're not for here. They're not for this restaurant.

[0:36:38.7]

**Donni Choate:** They going to be, but they never been purged yet. I'm going to put them in the purge tanks, and then rather than come and boil them tomorrow—they'll be purged tomorrow, and rather than come in with them tomorrow, then on Friday I'm going to come in here and boil 300 or 400 pounds, rather than come and boil 800. Then dirty it twice, rather than once, and then no matter what, you still going to tell people no, that you ain't got enough. So I could open more nights, but, what I do, I do Fridays. When I see that I got enough to go Saturday, I go Saturdays. When I got Tuesday's crawfish already in the purge system after Saturday, I do the Tuesday, if I think that I'm going to be able to get the Friday. And then I'll do the Tuesday, then start the Friday and Saturday, but I want to make sure I got the Friday and Saturday.

[0:37:39.0]

**Rien Fertel:** Was purging always a part of the business?

[0:37:42.2]

**Donni Choate:** Day one when we started, a friend and I shed soft-shelled crabs, and right at that time, we had kind of abandoned the shedding of the crabs and we went a summer without doing it. So the system was all there.

[0:38:09.1]

**Rien Fertel:** The tanks, you're saying?

[0:38:11.0]

**Donni Choate:** Right. What it is, is the trays are three feet by eight, and some are two and a half by nine, and they three feet wide and eight feet long, and it's all plumbed in and water spraying, and it's got overflow pipes where, when it's spraying, the water comes up and goes out. It's all plumbed in, it sucks in and pulls it in and some's going out. And then when the crawfish can't eat, the water's going through their system all the time, like a pump.

Well, when they can't eat, it starts to clean their gut, and then it kind of makes the vein white, and also once the gut's cleansed, the meat starts to cleanse, and then they basically all taste the same. There's not one a little fishy or a little bit this and you get those little different tastes from different areas, and some of them in ponds, they'll taste—you could catch them right here and go right over there and catch them only two rows down and get one of them here and there that might taste a little this and a little that different, for what reason I don't know. I'm not quite sure. But when you purge them, they pretty much all taste the same.

[0:39:44.3]

**Rien Fertel:** And can you tell me about the boiling process, like what you do?

[0:39:48.4]

**Donni Choate:** Cajun Claws is based on cayenne. And, yeah, they have Tabasco, which is an extremely good product, but what we do, they take the skin of the cayenne pepper and they take the skin off because they can't use the skin of the pepper in the hot sauce, in Louisiana Hot Sauce, for the fact that it'll stop up the bottle. It don't dissolve, so it'll stop up the bottles. So they take that skin off and they learned that they could use it to sell it for different things. I don't know what else. There's people that buy it. I don't know what they use it for. Some of them buy it and maybe they make hot sauce with it, I don't know.

[0:40:37.1]

**Rien Fertel:** From Tabasco.

[0:40:38.0]

**Donni Choate:** From, no, Bruce Food.

[0:40:39.9]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, from Bruce Foods, Louisiana Hot Sauce brand.

[0:40:43.3]

**Donni Choate:** Louisiana Hot Sauce. Tabasco's a whole different thing. So, cayenne, Tabasco, a completely different thing. But Louisiana Hot Sauce was bought by Georgia Mills, but it's still in Cade, but when we order it, we got to order it from Georgia.

So, yeah, and then we take it and we put it in the water and we boil it, boil it with some other spices and so forth, and when we boil it, it releases the flavor in the water, but it don't dissolve. It's mealy. It's like it won't dissolve. So if you boil with it, it'll be all over the crawfish.

[0:41:26.2]

**Rien Fertel:** It's like a pulp?

[0:41:26.8]

**Donni Choate:** It's like a pulp. So we turn the water off and it sinks and it goes to the bottom and it gets out of the way of the crawfish, so we're boiling water, 212 degrees, boiling water, and then we go into a pot that might be 180, 190. I don't know the temperature. I know it's not boiling; it's cooler than boiling.

[0:41:51.5]

**Rien Fertel:** The one with the pepper in it?

[0:41:53.9]

**Donni Choate:** Right, and the other spices and seasonings, and we got three batches like that. So when we leave them in there ten, fifteen minutes, then we start serving first round. When we start serving first round, I'll serve out the first basket. When that basket's served, I have one ready already to replace it, and then I jump to the second basket that I have, and then I just keep doing the process over and over.

[0:42:20.0]

**Rien Fertel:** So those three are all the same.

[0:42:23.7]

**Donni Choate:** They're all the same, but some of them that's soaked longer, if they got more pepper, if I know that they soaked longer, yeah, they're going to be a little stronger. Well, I'll season it a little lighter.

[0:42:38.5]

**Rien Fertel:** I see. And what do you do for seasoning? Is it dry or a sprinkle?

[0:42:43.9]

**Donni Choate:** It's a dry seasoning, and we mix it, and Jodi's father created it. It's actually a low-sodium seasoning and it has half the salt of Tony Chachere's. Because he had heart disease and he didn't want to—he wanted to try to do something and be a little heart-healthy. When you have less salt, you have more seasoning. When you have less salt and more seasoning, you've got more flavor. So people really like it, and it was

created by him. He inspired us all. Between Jodi and I and my kids, we all cook, everyone. They were stirring rouxs at four years old, four or five years old. We got pictures, stirring roux, them stirring rouxs, making cakes, working the mixes and making cakes with their grandfather.

[0:43:43.9]

**Rien Fertel:** You have three sons?

[0:43:45.1]

**Donni Choate:** Three sons.

[0:43:47.0]

**Rien Fertel:** And they were all in the business?

[0:43:48.6]

**Donni Choate:** Oh, yeah, they all worked right here, actually a big, big asset to us, at ten and twelve years old, Kyle was up here running the place, and then his next brother did, and then Tanner, when he was young, he was up here running the front and learning the list and the registers and going up there and taking care of tables and making sure things was going around. So, yeah, it was a complete family, complete family deal.

[0:44:16.8]



**Rien Fertel:** Besides the crawfish, Cajun Claws is famous for the scene before you open and the waits and the amount of time people will wait and have a beer, whether they're in the parking lot or in the bar, where we're sitting now. Can you describe that scene and if it was like that from the very beginning. Were you so busy in the beginning when you opened in [19]96, or did it take a while for people to find you?

[0:44:45.5]

**Donni Choate:** No, actually Cajun Claws took off the first night that we opened. People packed in, and I remember the parking lot being muddy as hell and people stomping around in the mud, but they were in here, and it was so packed and it was ridiculous, people everywhere, but it's just never, ever slowed down. It's been the same way, and this is our twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth year, and it's been the same. The only time it thins down a little bit, when you start getting five nights, yeah, the crowd spreads out a little bit, but Tuesday night, Wednesday night, Thursday night, you still going to kick. The wait might not be quite as long.

But on the weekends, yeah, they do get out in the parking lot and get here at 1:00 and 2:00 o'clock and the kids go in the back lot and kick soccer balls, throw football, baseball, so they hit baseballs, they play volleyball, and the parents sit out and have a cocktail or a beer, and wait and break out the lawn chairs and wait for us to open. And when we open, it's on. Yeah, it's a pretty cool thing.

Actually, I watched some of them, they had some of them, they were from Oregon or somewhere, they had a little camper top and had a little porch that came off the back, and they started unloading all their stuff, and you could tell they had been here prior, because they knew exactly what to do. They knew it was going to be a—so they kind of just spread out all their stuff all over the lawn, and the kids were playing all over, and it looked like they were having a good time.

[0:46:33.2]

**Rien Fertel:** Did you ever—looking back, did you ever think you'd be in the restaurant business? Did you think you would be a restaurant where people from all over the world come and eat this one thing?

[0:46:41.8]

**Donni Choate:** No, indeed not. We never, ever figured it to be thataway. It's just something that God blessed us with. No, it made us good providers for our kids and got them good educations and they went to good schools, and it paid off, because they all are great, great kids and doing extremely well in their lives.

[0:47:10.0]

**Rien Fertel:** And they've all worked here. I remember seeing them growing up. Is there a plan for the future? Do you plan on doing this for a certain amount of time? Are they

maybe interested in running it down the road? What's the—do you talk about it or think about it?

[0:47:28.6]

**Donni Choate:** Well, actually, we talk about it. It comes up quite often. The kids, they really don't want to deal with it, but they don't want us to leave it either. Thanks to God that my health is good, from what I think of. My energy's good and I feel good, and I love to get out and go to work and get it done, and it's fun to come in and boil crawfish and see people happy and festive, and it's kind of like a big ol' party, and it's a lot of fun.

[0:48:03.2]

**Rien Fertel:** You talked about—well, two questions about availability of crawfish. You said when you go to four or five days a week. When does that usually happen in the season?

[0:48:12.8]

**Donni Choate:** We'd normally now be doing that.

[0:48:16.2]

**Rien Fertel:** You are doing it now? Even February?

[0:48:16.9]

**Donni Choate:** Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. I done see myself doing it in November.

[0:48:21.7]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, really? This year's different?

[0:48:25.0]

**Donni Choate:** It's different.

[0:48:27.0]

**Rien Fertel:** And why is that?

[0:48:28.1]

**Donni Choate:** There's a lot of small crawfish on the market, and when they're small ones, yeah, it's harder to get the good ones, and if I don't boil them, if I don't boil those kind, then it's stretched out further and further. I used to go and stay within a little two- or three-, four-mile radius from my business and get all the—I had two or three farmers that would come in, and I had so many, I had to take them and sell some to other people and to other restaurants just to be able to get rid of them and so forth. Yeah, my buyers, some of my buyers would take them, but I was paying good money, good prices on them, but you couldn't get your money back through the distributors. You would always—it was a negative, because on the road they wasn't paying that kind of money. They was paying for little market-size crawfish and wasn't looking to pay no more than this or that. Then for what I had invested, I had to kind of get my places in a row, where I could kind of get rid of some and help me out.

And then I'd hold on to some and in a day or two, you think you got too many and then right when that happens, the man blesses you with a great night and you end up going through more than what you really needed, and you got half of what you thought you was going to have in the cooler, and then the next day it kind of does the same, and next thing you know, you cleared out of them and you're looking for some.

[0:49:56.8]

**Rien Fertel:** So in this year, 2020, we have a lot of small crawfish and not a lot of select crawfish on the market.

[0:50:01.7]

**Donni Choate:** Right.

[0:50:03.7]

**Rien Fertel:** Are we in a dip, or is it a trend like where it goes up and down? Will we have big crawfish next year or does it keep going down, down, down?

[0:50:12.7]

**Donni Choate:** I'm not exactly sure about it. I'm just kind of worried about it a little bit, but, no, as far as for a trend, it'd be an up and down. In all the years, I never, ever seen it like this. You see one guy, his crawfish are a certain size one week and they right on the edge of really, really being the stuff that we need, and the next week, they don't go in a

week, and then the next week when they go, you figure they're going to be just exactly what you need, and they're exactly the same as when they fished less, like no progress.

And so, yeah, they've got something that's affecting it, and what it is, a lot of them said, "Well, you need a lot of sunlight," which that's what LSU's saying and also the county agent, Mark Shirley, and he's the agent. He goes checking ponds and all this, so forth. He said, "Well, we need more sunlight." Well, I had big crawfish, and I'm not saying I started a little late, but I don't think it was this late, where we was furnishing, and I remember the winter being just exactly the same. It was like it wasn't real cold-cold. It was cloudy almost every day and raining a lot, just nasty, muggy weather. So I'm not certain that's exactly what it is. I think sunshine would help some, but I'm not definitely sure that's the cause of it.

[0:52:00.5]

**Rien Fertel:** Do you have other guesses about what it could be?

[0:52:03.3]

**Donni Choate:** I'm just thinking changing of the Earth, if I had to guess one thing, you know, if I just had to throw something at it, because it's like it's been—

[0:52:18.4]

**Rien Fertel:** When you say changing of the Earth, do you mean climate change?

[0:52:20.0]

**Donni Choate:** Well, we don't want to go there too much, if you get what I'm saying.

[0:52:25.1]

**Rien Fertel:** [Laughter] Yeah.

[0:52:26.2]

**Donni Choate:** You know how people feel about that. But I'm all in on it for sure. But some people just close-minded to it, and then you don't know who you're going to insult. It might be the guy that's getting you the big crawfish and he thinks of you a whole different way and so forth. So you kind of got to watch what you say and this and that, especially with a restaurant. You got some people believe in certain things and some don't. It's like going into politics or religion. You can't cross those lines. It's tricky, extremely tricky. I just kind of steer away from it because a lot of people think they have all the answers.

But, yeah, I would think that—I just noticed it's harder and harder to get the big ones as it goes. I don't know if it's going to keep on like that. I'm not sure. I can't predict the future. But I noticed for sure it was a lot easier to get big crawfish, and it's getting harder and harder. So, evolution is just changing of the Earth.

[0:53:40.4]

**Rien Fertel:** So I just have one more question. When is the crawfish season? When are you working as a broker?

[0:53:44.1]

**Donni Choate:** I go November through May.

[0:53:44.1]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay. So November through May, so that's six, seven, eight months of the year. What do you do the rest of the year? What have you done, traditionally?

[0:53:54.2]

**Donni Choate:** I've just fixed all my broke junk. And if I don't have to pay somebody to do it, I did carpenter work before, I can fix just about anything, and if I don't have to hire no one to fix stuff between my house, I take care of my house, Jodi's mother's house, because her husband isn't alive anymore. She's got a ninety-four-year-old aunt, kind of do stuff around her house. Then I got the restaurant and I got my business in Forked Island. And just keeping up with the lawns and just a little rot here and there, if I don't have to pay people to do it, it's kind of like a check for me, you know? If it's coming out your account, yeah. But if it's not coming out your account, then it's kind of like your own job. So I did that for all those years, kind of just do my own thing.

But, no, you got to be extremely disciplined and budget your spending and kind of watch out where your money goes, because you go five months is a lot of time or even longer with no income.

[0:55:03.4]



**Rien Fertel:** Well, I want to thank you for doing this interview. This was really great.

[0:55:06.1]

**Donni Choate:** Yeah, man, yeah.

[0:55:09.9]

**Rien Fertel:** It was good to sit down with you.

[0:55:10.5]

**Donni Choate:** I appreciate you doing it.

[0:55:12.4]

**Rien Fertel:** Thank you.

[0:55:14.1]

**Donni Choate:** You'll have to come out with us at some point, maybe run some cages or even—yeah, run cages or come and see the purge system. Actually, I had a different system set up closer to Intracoastal City, and when [20]05, for the Hurricane Rita, the storm surge came and wiped the building out, and it was a lot bigger than what I got set up now. I had an old freezer and I kind of just stuffed eighteen trays inside that old freezer and kind of just put a brand-new top on that, and it's kind of raggedy-looking, but the system that I built in there does the job and it's extremely consistent.

Then within the last year, I put a little lean-to on the back of the warehouse and stuffed another fifteen trays in there with just a little building, trying to make do with what I can, and just a lot of old junk that I had, put it all together, and trays that I kind of gathered up. But out of forty-something trays that I had set up in Intracoastal, they found two of them.

[0:56:25.0]

**Rien Fertel:** From the storm.

[0:56:26.3]

**Donni Choate:** From the storm. And they found them in Gueydan.

[0:56:30.4]

**Rien Fertel:** Which is how far?

[0:56:31.2]

**Donni Choate:** Twenty-four miles.

[0:56:32.0]

**Rien Fertel:** From Intracoastal? [Laughter]

[0:56:33.2]

**Donni Choate:** It was two of my trays. That's unbelievable. That's unbelievable. A guy from the Drainage Board that I knew worked and he sprayed the canals, and he was driving and seen two of them floating and he picked them up, and he had been to my—he lived, actually, across the street from the purge system, and he knew it was my trays right off. He recognized the trays, and he loaded them back in his boat and pulled them in, and he brought them all the way back and came back and gave them to me, and I still have those two trays today.

But all the rest, they gone and we don't know where they went, if people just picked them up. A lot of the storm surge went from it came into all the way towards Palmetto State Park, and we went through there. That was before the park was even built. We went through there looking for those trays and we never found them. Only thing I could see, maybe something sunk them and they might have went got in the Vermilion River, because we was only a eighth or half a mile from the—I mean a quarter to a half a mile from the river. Maybe got in the river some kind of way and maybe something weighted them down to the bottom. Because even with water in them full, they would've never sunk. You could fill it with water and it won't sink. So I don't know really what happened to them. It's crazy.

[0:57:56.4]

**Rien Fertel:** I want to ask you one more question. This reminds me. So when I first really met and talked to you, I think eight years ago I wrote a story about you, and in that same time for the story I interviewed the LSU lead crawfish scientist. I forget his name. And he told me that crawfish are one—he called it the most sustainable product we have

in South Louisiana, because they're just regenerating and they eat everything. Crawfish farmers, as I understand it—

[Interruption]

[0:59:15.0]

**Rien Fertel:** So he said that crawfish just regenerate themselves, that it's very easy for them. He said we'll never, like, not have crawfish. You're telling me over the past—we've talked for an hour—that crawfish are a little more susceptible to changes in the environment and climate. Are crawfish more fragile than we think of them?

[0:59:34.9]

**Donni Choate:** Actually, when they real young, they *extremely* sensitive, like, oh, god, it's unbelievable. Those little crawfish, you get one—

[0:59:47.7]

**Rien Fertel:** And how big are we talking, do they have hard shells then? Like what size?

[0:59:50.4]

**Donni Choate:** No, they grow tiny. They could be up to a quarter of an inch. No, they mostly real soft, and if you get any kind of bad water or water that can't be changed out, they can't survive that. Also you could get some big, big rains, and rainwater's not exactly great for them, but they take it, and if it's too much, it goes out the overflow pipe

and they kind of pump more in, but what happens, the rain—and a lot of times they can't get the water off of the property because the coulees and the ditches where they drain out of are actually higher than the water in the pond, so if you open the gate, it's going to come in. So they can't really get the water out fast enough.

And then some ponds, right at the beginning of the season, the rice straw's in there, and when they cut that rice straw, the rice straw tends, when you put the water on it, it rots, and when it rots, the water gets—it knocks the oxygen in the water down, and when it does that, those little small crawfish, if you can't get the water off and change it out, those little small tender, tenderest little bitty, bitty crawfish, they just don't survive it.

But, yeah, they reproduce quite a bit, but they more sensitive than what we think, but a lot of those guys down in the ponds, they go to the Spillway at the end of the season and restock their ponds, but it's more of—once they interbreed, it's like they get smaller. So they cross-breed them with the Spillway, and when they cross-breed them, they tend to do very well in the ponds and grow good. And that might be one of the things, because Spillway, they got to furnish their market and their customers first before people could seed ponds, and a lot of people couldn't seed ponds this year. And maybe just the interbreeding, they just kind of had what they had and kind of stock—took crawfish from one pond over into another, and just out of their own stuff, got some from one friend, put them in his, the friend got some from his, put them in theirs, and kind of crossed it up thataway, but they didn't actually cross it with Spillway crawfish, which is a different kind of crawfish.

[1:02:37.2]

**Rien Fertel:** Why couldn't they seed this year?

[1:02:39.7]

**Donni Choate:** Well, the Spillway didn't produce like it should.

[1:02:43.3]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, so that's where LSU or whoever sells the seed—it's not LSU, but who sells the seed? So that's where they get the seed?

[1:02:49.1]

**Donni Choate:** That's where they get the seed from, the Spillway, and they actually grow *extremely* good and cross-breed with the pond crawfish, they cross-breed very well and they strong. Even though they soft and tender, they might be green, they stronger than pond crawfish, actually. You can keep them in the cooler four days. You can't do that with pond crawfish unless it's some real hard, hard, hard, hard crawfish. Those hard red, red ones, you can leave them in a sack for a week and they still ain't died.

[1:03:30.2]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[1:03:31.8]

**Donni Choate:** Oh, yeah. But no quality to it. It's too hard to eat. But, yeah, those Spillway crawfish is the stuff. And they couldn't do it because the price stayed high and

then it would cost them a hell of a lot to seed their ponds up, and then they were taking care of all their customers, and the customers weren't getting enough, much less trying to sell some to the people that need to seed ponds. So I think a lot of interbreeding went on and was just kind of crossing them up, and maybe that's got something to do with a lot of the little ones.

[1:04:15.5]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, that makes sense.

[1:04:16.4]

**Donni Choate:** So I'm not exactly sure, but something to throw out there. But far as for anything in stone, you know how that is. It's just a creature. You can't put your finger on it.

[1:04:30.4]

**Rien Fertel:** All right. Well, I want to thank you again for doing this.

[1:04:32.3]

**Donni Choate:** Great!

[1:04:33.1]

**Rien Fertel:** Thank you so much.

[1:04:33.7]

**Donni Choate:** I enjoyed it, man.

[1:04:35.2]

**Rien Fertel:** Thank you.

[1:04:36.4]

**Donni Choate:** Hope I was helpful to you.

[1:04:37.6]

**Rien Fertel:** Very much.

[End of Interview]