

**MARTHA LOU GADSDEN**  
**Martha Lou's Kitchen, Charleston, South Carolina**

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**Marion Square, Charleston, South Carolina**

**Interviewer: Sara Wood**

**Transcription: Shelley Chance**

**Length: Twenty-seven minutes**

**Project: Charleston Food + Wine Oral History Bus**

**[Begin Martha Lou Gadsden Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Martha Lou Gadsden:** He was just good but it didn't seem like he applied his self to his work like he should have.

**00:00:09**

**Interviewer:** There's so many murals. I mean you don't see them around too much but when you do see a mural it's most of the time he's the one who painted it and--

**00:00:15**

**MLG:** Uh-hm; uh-hm.

**00:00:16**

**Interviewer:** I know that your restaurant is pretty iconic for that.

**00:00:19**

**MLG:** Yeah; you hadn't been there since he put me on. You haven't--you saw that? Okay; than yeah--

**00:00:27**

**Interviewer:** Yeah; I think when I was there he--it was recent. I have a picture of you next to it.

**00:00:33**

**MLG:** Yeah; on the wall--on the outside wall?

00:00:34

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

00:00:35

**MLG:** Okay; okay.

00:00:37

**Interviewer:** Now was that in the last couple years that he did that?

00:00:39

**MLG:** Uh-hm; yeah, just before he died, about two years ago.

00:00:48

**Interviewer:** Okay; all right we're looking good here. I'm going to go ahead and start the sound and I'm going to have you--I'm going to hold this in front of you and I'm going to click this [Claps], all right; we're good. This is just to tell when the sound starts. Do you want to click it?

00:01:05

**MLG:** No.

00:01:08

**Interviewer:** Some people like to do that sometimes. I'm going to start the tape. I'm going to stand back here so I don't--. Okay and we're rolling Miss Martha Lou. And so to start I just wanted to ask you if you would say hello and introduce yourself and tell me who you are?

**00:01:37**

**MLG:** Hello; I'm Martha Lou Gadsden. I'm the owner of Martha Lou's Kitchen. I've been there for the last 32 years.

**00:01:50**

**Interviewer:** And will you tell me a little bit about where you grew up Miss Martha Lou? Did you grow up here?

**00:01:53**

**MLG:** Charleston is my home but I was reared in a little place called Manning, South Carolina. My grandparents, I was reared by my grandparents. My father died when I was five. And my sister was six and my brother was three. And my grandparents took us and they raised us until we got grown and finished school. Then I came back to Charleston and I've been here ever since.

**00:02:24**

**Interviewer:** And will you tell me your grandparents' names for the record?

**00:02:26**

**MLG:** My grandparents were Marley and Willie Walker from Manning, South Carolina.

**00:02:34**

**Interviewer:** And how far is Manning from here? Is it far?

**00:02:38**

**MLG:** It's about 75 miles from Charleston.

**00:02:41**

**Interviewer:** And what's your father's name?

**00:02:42**

**MLG:** Joseph Simmons. He died when I was five years old.

**00:02:48**

**Interviewer:** And what was your mother's name?

**00:02:51**

**MLG:** Lillie Mae Simmons.

**00:02:54**

**Interviewer:** And I'm wondering Miss Martha Lou if you could talk a little bit about you know we're asking people a lot about their influences on their cooking. Who would you say had the biggest influence on your cooking?

**00:03:07**

**MLG:** Well I didn't do too much when I was a child 'cause I had an older sister. My grandmother used to tell her what to do. So I wasn't too much interested but after I got grown and had children, started having children I started doing and I used to have friends come in and they liked my cooking. And I would cook for them and I enjoyed doing it. And that's the reason

I liked doing cooking and then after I had children I had to learn how to cook. So I started cooking and I learned by doing.

**00:03:51**

**Interviewer:** What would you say is something that you learned to do that you still love to cook today like something that you really--the one dish that you really enjoy making?

**00:04:02**

**MLG:** Hmm.

**00:04:04**

**Interviewer:** One of them?

**00:04:06**

**MLG:** Well I enjoy everything. I mean mostly but at the shop now I do my bread pudding, my cornbread; those are two things I do all the time. But I do other cooking now, but those are the things that I do, nobody touch--. [*Laughs*]

**00:04:25**

**Interviewer:** You won't let them.

**00:04:28**

**MLG:** 'Cause I want consistency. And they might want to put something else in it and I don't want that in there. [*Laughs*]

**00:04:37**

**Interviewer:** Miss Martha Lou could you tell me just before I forget to ask you this later the names of your daughters for the record?

**00:04:43**

**MLG:** My daughters they are Joyce Taylor, Debra Gadsden, Ruth Gadsden and Lillie Mae Gadsden.

**00:04:56**

**Interviewer:** So you said that you kind of had to learn to cook by necessity because you had your children. What made you--how did you get started working in restaurants because I think I asked you before--you talked a little bit about working in other places for people.

**00:05:11**

**MLG:** Yeah I started off as a bus girl in the '50s and then I moved up on to a waitress and then I moved on to cook later years. But I started off as a bus girl.

**00:05:28**

**Interviewer:** Where was the name of the place that you started off?

**00:05:31**

**MLG:** It was an old place named The Fox. And it used to be down on Calhoun--not Calhoun, on Spring Street down by the bridge. It used to be--no longer there now, so--. **[Laughs]** It's outdated.

**00:05:47**

**Interviewer:** And was it the same restaurant? Was it The Fox that you worked your way up to waitress and then cook; was it all in that same spot?

**00:05:53**

**MLG:** No; I was only a bus girl at The Fox and then I went to a place called The Snack Bar, DJX Snack Bar. We used to cook short orders there and then I went to The **[Inaudible]** House; I was a waitress there. And then I went to a place called Jess Junior Snack Bar and that was the last place that I went before I came into my own business. He needed somebody to open up his business so I wasn't employed at that time, so I went in and I opened the business for him. And I got dissatisfied and I left. I stayed there about four years and I left and then I opened--. I started doing a little cooking at home. I used to serve dinners from my house. And then I found this place that I have now and now we had to get everything together. So I got it actually in '82 but I wasn't opened; I wasn't able to open until '83 because I had to buy all the equipment and everything.

**00:07:12**

So I wasn't able to get in there 'til March of '83. And the first day I made \$10 selling hotdogs and sodas. **[Laughs]** Then I moved on from that to dinners, breakfast, dinner, and that's what I'm doing only lunch and dinner now--mostly.



00:07:35

**Interviewer:** When you--can you talk a little bit more about the dinners you used to serve from your house? It was here in Charleston?

00:07:42

**MLG:** Well we used to serve the same thing that I'm serving now, chicken, fish, pork chops, rice, lima beans, cornbread, bread pudding; that's about what I serve in the shop now.

00:08:00

**Interviewer:** Would people come--they would come to the house and just have dinner when you--?

00:08:04

**MLG:** No; carry outs.

00:08:06

**Interviewer:** Carry outs? I mean how--what was your customer base like then when you had--when you had it at your house?

00:08:12

**MLG:** Oh we made--at that time, food was a little cheaper than it is now, so we used to sell dinners for \$7 or \$8 I think it was. But those days are gone. *[Laughs]*

00:08:33

**Interviewer:** How long did you do that for out of your house?

**00:08:34**

**MLG:** Oh about eight--seven, eight months; that's all, until I can--until I got the place that I am now, uh-huh.

**00:08:46**

**Interviewer:** And so you got the place you said in '82?

**00:08:48**

**MLG:** Uh-hm.

**00:08:50**

**Interviewer:** And I think I remember you telling me this before but you--were you around 50 when--50 years old when you got--?

**00:08:56**

**MLG:** Oh I was 53 when I opened; yeah, uh-hm.

**00:09:00**

**Interviewer:** I mean that seems like a very mature age to have a restaurant you know like you--you had--.

**00:09:06**

**MLG:** Well yeah I guess it was but you see a lot of people knew me. They knew who I was.

And it wasn't hard to get customers 'cause once they find out your name it's not too hard to get customers. They gradually started coming you know, so it wasn't hard.

**00:09:26**

**Interviewer:** Have you noticed, I mean from the time that you were working in other restaurants to you know serving out of your house to--to your restaurant now do you get a lot more tourists in your restaurant now as opposed to the--the types of customers who would come into the places that you worked before?

**00:09:45**

**MLG:** Well right now I'm doing a lot more; for the last couple of years we're doing pretty good with tourists. It's most--that's the majority of my business now.

**00:09:59**

**Interviewer:** What do you think about that?

**00:10:00**

**MLG:** I enjoy seeing them come because most of them tell me they just saw me on TV or they read a magazine or something, so it's very complimentary.

**00:10:12**

**Interviewer:** And so Martha Lou can you talk a little bit--I mean I know you mentioned some dishes but can you talk about the items that you have on your menu that have--that you in any

way have felt--'cause you know you're born and raised in this region. It's the Low Country. Can you talk about any specific menu items that you think reflect the Low Country's influence on you being born and raised here?

**00:10:35**

**MLG:** Well one of the main things down here in Charleston is lima beans, rice, and chicken.

**[Laughs]** You start off with that. If you start off with that then you can--you got it made, but you add collard greens, okra soup, and cornbread, bread pudding, and you got a meal. But our basics are lima beans and chicken and rice.

**00:11:06**

**Interviewer:** Are those some of the things that your sister would fix for you when you were growing up? I mean you--you said that your grandmother had your sister fix--.

**00:11:13**

**MLG:** Well no; she would help my grandmother. My grandmother did the cooking. But she would help. Well you see we was brought up on collard greens and lima beans and okra soup and stuff like that, so it was nothing that I noticed she went and you know--she was doing a little bit more than I did. But see I learned by doing. I like--I used to make cakes all the time but I don't make them no more. I used to like to bake cakes, but I don't do that anymore.

**00:11:44**

**Interviewer:** How come?

00:11:45

**MLG:** I don't have the time right now. And then I focus more on the vegetables and the meats and stuff like that.

00:11:55

**Interviewer:** When did you make cakes what kinds of cakes would you make?

00:11:58

**MLG:** I'd make mostly pound cakes; yeah.

00:12:02

**Interviewer:** And can--we don't try to mine anybody for recipes 'cause some people are very-- their recipes are secret but can you tell me a little bit about your pound cake like how would you make it?

00:12:13

**MLG:** Well when I used to make it, it would be um, I would use butter, eggs, flour, self-rising flour, and sugar, cinnamon--not cinnamon, vanilla mostly and you whip that together and you get you a nice cake.

00:12:37

**Interviewer:** Did your grandmother make pound cake?

00:12:37

**MLG:** Oh yeah; used to make them--

00:12:41

**Interviewer:** Does that have an influence on--do you think that--that has an influence on your pound cake?

00:12:45

**MLG:** Well I don't bake them no more so [*Laughs*]

00:12:48

**Interviewer:** Yeah; when you did make them?

00:12:50

**MLG:** But I mean everybody's enjoyed, so I guess so.

00:12:54

**Interviewer:** Martha Lou how come you watched--I mean just you know you have had this restaurant for--for a long time and you've you know worked in--in food for a long time here in Charleston. How have you noticed things change in terms of--I mean any changes that you've noticed in the last 10 or 20 years on how people eat in Charleston? Have you noticed anything?

00:13:16

**MLG:** Well I don't go out to eat that much and I just like just ordinary food like cabbage and rice and stuff like that. Now all this fancy food, cauliflower, asparagus and stuff, no; that ain't me. [*Laughs*] But I usually like you know just common food, just--.

00:13:48

**Interviewer:** Now after working in the restaurant all day do you go home and fix supper for yourself?

00:13:52

**MLG:** No; very seldom I might fix a little something, very seldom though.

00:13:58

**Interviewer:** Um--

00:13:59

**MLG:** 'Cause I don't eat like I used to eat.

00:14:05

**Interviewer:** How has it changed? Are you--how has that changed?

00:14:07

**MLG:** You know about 10 years ago I had my legs done and I don't know whether it was the medicine or what but it cut my appetite and I never gained it back. So I don't eat that much; they're always getting on me, mother did you eat yet? Yeah; I don't eat. I didn't see you eat today. Yeah; I done eat. [*Laughs*] But my appetite is not the same but I do eat.

00:14:37

**Interviewer:** And when you said get your legs done do you mean like you--?

**00:14:39**

**MLG:** I had two knee replacements.

**00:14:41**

**Interviewer:** Oh gosh.

**00:14:42**

**MLG:** Yeah.

**00:14:43**

**Interviewer:** At the same time?

**00:14:44**

**MLG:** Uh-hm.

**00:14:45**

**Interviewer:** Wow; get them both right out of the way huh?

**00:14:47**

**MLG:** Yeah; well at that time they were doing them two at a time, and then I went to rehab for 21 days so that helped. I was back to work and I had them done the 31<sup>st</sup> of August and I was back to work in late November or the first of December, something like that.

**00:15:09**



**Interviewer:** And when you were gone, when you were you know working on rehab and getting your knees stronger, who was taking care of the restaurant? Do your--you were talking a little bit about your daughters working here?

**00:15:18**

**MLG:** Yeah; but my--I had a son who used to work for me and then I had a sister. She died. And I had a granddaughter and she--all them was there you know carrying on while I was out.

**00:15:35**

**Interviewer:** Do you have any--I wonder what your thoughts are about you know if you ever decide to retire do you hope that they will keep the restaurant going?

**00:15:44**

**MLG:** I would hope so but I don't know. I don't know. I would hope so.

**00:15:53**

**Interviewer:** Martha Lou I'm wondering--I just have a couple more questions; is that okay?

**00:15:56**

**MLG:** Uh-hm.

**00:15:57**

**Interviewer:** Do you have time for a couple more?

**00:15:58**

**MLG:** Uh-hm.

**00:15:59**

**Interviewer:** I'm wondering in terms of you know having so much experience and having the restaurant for so long, do you--has--have you surprised yourself in any way with your cooking or is there--has there been a moment where you recognized a change in yourself just from you know working--having your own place and--?

**00:16:23**

**MLG:** Uh, well I--I personally like consistency. And see nowadays these children they want to do what they want to do, how they want to do it; it makes me mad sometimes. But I like things done the way I want them done. But it doesn't get that way all the time. So there's certain things I fix, I don't let them do it.

**00:16:54**

**Interviewer:** What are your--and can you tell me those things one more time? I know you mentioned them--

**00:16:58**

**MLG:** Yeah, the cornbread, the bread pudding, and meat for my vegetables; I do that. And they can put on the vegetables but I got to put the meat in and the seasoning. *[Laughs]*

**00:17:15**

**Interviewer:** Can you talk a little bit about your process through the day like what time you get to work and the--your rhythm, the kinds of things that you--?

00:17:21

**MLG:** Well we--I don't get to work until about 11:30 or 12:00 now because we don't do breakfast anymore.

00:17:32

**Interviewer:** Oh you don't?

00:17:32

**MLG:** So we just do lunch and two of my daughters, Debra and Ruth, they come in and they open up and get things started, what we don't get straight the day before. They do it and they get things started for me. And what we do, we cook our food but we fry our meat to order and make sure that you get nice hot meat 'cause you might want white meat chicken or--and here's a person come in and they want dark meat and I go and put down both and the one is going to stay there and the other person might not call for that for a long time.

00:18:25

So I mean what we do, we make sure that your meat is nice and hot when you come in and--or you can call your order in. Give me your meat and your whole dinner will be nice and hot. *[Laughs]*

00:18:41

**Interviewer:** Martha Lou I'm wondering, I know when I interviewed you a couple summers ago I asked you what the most popular item on your menu was and you said you know fried chicken. It's the chicken. Is there something else on your menu that you kind of wish that people would order a little more as much as the chicken, like do you have something that you kind of wish that like people--would be as popular as the chicken, like something--?

**00:19:06**

**MLG:** Well they made that popular, not me. *[Laughs]* The people, the customers, they made that popular; that's why I say chicken 'cause everybody--I've never tasted chicken before. This chicken tastes like my grandmother's. This chicken, I have never eaten chicken like this. I get so many--I mean people from all over, all I want is the chicken. You know so I mean it's not me; it's the customers. *[Laughs]*

**00:19:37**

**Interviewer:** Did you ever imagine that your chicken would be talked about so much?

**00:19:40**

**MLG:** No; I sure didn't. I sure didn't. But I don't do it no different than most people do, but I don't know--I don't know why. I really don't because why they rave over it I don't know why.

**00:20:04**

**Interviewer:** Miss Martha Lou I don't want to take too much more of your time 'cause I know that you know it's hot in here and--

00:20:10

**MLG:** No; it's comfortable to me.

00:20:12

**Interviewer:** You're comfortable?

00:20:12

**MLG:** Yes.

00:20:12

**Interviewer:** Do you have time for another question?

00:20:14

**MLG:** Uh-hm.

00:20:15

**Interviewer:** Okay; I'm just going to turn this camera off for a second. Is it--is it too hot in here; are you getting hot?

00:20:33

**MLG:** Uh-um; uh-um, it's comfortable to me.

00:20:36

**Interviewer:** Okay; I know those lights can be kind of intense.

00:20:38

**MLG:** No; see I ain't got no--I don't have much blood. [*Laughs*] So you'll be through in what--  
how long?

00:20:48

**Interviewer:** Like five minutes.

00:20:50

**MLG:** Okay; let me call her and then I won't have to wait.

00:20:53

**Interviewer:** Yeah; okay.

00:20:57

**MLG:** Uh-hm. [*Makes Phone Call*]

00:21:47

**Interviewer:** I saw that nice magazine article that I think it was *Charleston Magazine*--

00:21:51

**MLG:** Oh okay.

00:21:52

**Interviewer:** --they did of all the--all the women. You were in it and there was some--a few  
other women.

00:21:57

**MLG:** Uh-hm. [*Laughs*]

00:21:58

**Interviewer:** What did you think of that?

00:21:59

**MLG:** Real nice. Okay.

00:22:52

**Interviewer:** Is she close by?

00:22:52

**MLG:** Yeah; she it wouldn't take her long, so--

00:22:55

**Interviewer:** Okay; well I'm just going to ask you one more question and then we go back out there. And we can wait for her too; it's nice and cool out there.

00:23:02

**MLG:** Yeah but parking that's what it is.

00:23:04

**Interviewer:** You know what; if she wants to I know that they're having some cars that pulled in here by the bus.

**00:23:08**

**MLG:** Yeah; but she ain't going to know how to--you know, [*Laughs*] if I done knowing that before I called her.

**00:23:17**

**Interviewer:** Okay; I can go ask one of the police officers 'cause I know they've been letting people in just for a second if that's easier for her.

**00:23:23**

**MLG:** Well let's go on and she--

**00:23:26**

**Interviewer:** Okay; here we go. We're rolling again. Martha Lou I just wanted to ask you two questions; one is--is there anything that you want to add? I know you get interviewed a lot and people ask you a lot about the same things. Is there anything that you wish people would ask you and they never do in terms of--it could be the restaurant or just growing up here, something that people miss?

**00:23:54**

**MLG:** Hmm; not that I can think of. [*Laughs*]



00:24:00

**Interviewer:** And I've asked everybody this but if you had to pick a specific dish or an ingredient that is really--that really only comes from the Low Country or from the, you know South Carolina area here in Charleston, what would you say your favorite ingredient or dish would be here?

00:24:20

**MLG:** Well it's not mine; it's the people--it's the collard greens and the lima beans I can tell you that. **[Laughs]** Most everybody, or okra soup; these are Low Country stuff and most everybody asks for that and a little cabbage 'cause a lot of people rave about cabbage.

00:24:38

**Interviewer:** How do you fix your cabbage?

00:24:40

**MLG:** Well we steam them but I like to put a little bacon in it and season them up and that--that brings out the flavor and a little red pepper. And that brings out good flavor in that. Don't let them cook too long though, just long enough, you know.

00:25:01

**Interviewer:** How did you come up with that seasoning? Is it just sort of trial and error with the red pepper and the bacon?

00:25:05

**MLG:** No; well this is how my grandmom and them used to cook them, but we used to use butt's meat or hog jowl and stuff like that or bacon end and pieces that give it--bacon end and pieces give it a good flavor, but then again it's so high now you can't find it hardly.

**00:25:24**

**Interviewer:** You can't find it around here?

**00:25:25**

**MLG:** Uh-um. Pork is getting so high now.

**00:25:28**

**Interviewer:** Why is that do you know?

**00:25:29**

**MLG:** I don't know.

**00:25:31**

**Interviewer:** That's strange.

**00:25:31**

**MLG:** But pork has gotten--especially the bacon. You can't buy a pound of bacon--you know 12 ounces now is \$3 just for 12 ounces. They're taking 4 ounces from the pound. So you're paying \$6 for a pound and a half of bacon.

**00:25:59**

**Interviewer:** That's crazy.

**00:25:59**

**MLG:** So I don't know why.

**00:26:03**

**Interviewer:** Well Martha Lou is there anything else you want to add before I turn the tape off?

**00:26:06**

**MLG:** No, not really. But thank you for coming.

**00:26:09**

**Interviewer:** Thank you for coming. And just for the record will you tell me your birth date--for the record?

**00:26:14**

**MLG:** March 20, 1930.

**00:26:17**

**Interviewer:** March 20, 1930; well you have a birthday coming up.

**00:26:18**

**MLG:** That's right.

**00:26:19**

**Interviewer:** How old are you going to be?

**00:26:19**

**MLG:** Eighty four--eighty five.

**00:26:23**

**Interviewer:** Eighty-five; how are you going to celebrate?

**00:26:25**

**MLG:** I don't know. They're always giving me a little surprise, so I don't know. I don't--

**00:26:32**

**Interviewer:** Well thank you for coming out here.

**00:26:33**

**MLG:** No problem; no problem. Thanks for asking.

**00:26:39**

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**00:26:39**

**MLG:** So you're going to be in here for the rest of--?

**00:26:40**

**[End Martha Lou Gadsden Interview]**