Richard Carr
Berret's Seafood Restaurant
Williamsburg, Virginia

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Date: May 21, 2018
Location: Berret's Seafood Restaurant – Williamsburg, Virginia
Interviewer: Patrick Daglaris
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
Length: Fifty-nine minutes
Project: Tidewater Foodways

PD: Hello, this is Patrick Daglaris. I'm here with Jessica Taylor and Mr. Richard Carr at the Berret's Seafood Restaurant in Williamsburg, Virginia. Mr. Carr, if you could start with just where and when you were born.

[0:00:13.9]

RC: Where and when? Detroit, Michigan, December 18, 1957.

[0:00:21.1]

PD: Okay. And could you share your parents' names and occupations?

[0:00:26.1]

RC: My mother was Catherine Carr. She worked for the United Bank of Detroit. And my father was Lawrence Carr, and he worked for – he retired from Chrysler Corporation.

[0:00:41.7]

PD: And can you talk a little bit about growing up in Detroit, what your experience was like?

[0:00:47.4]

RC: It was fun. I mean, I lived across the street from a baseball field, so played baseball every day and hockey and football and everything. I was there, I lived in Detroit till I was sixteen. Then I moved down here to Virginia. But it was a great experience, went to good

schools, and had great friends. It was a good experience. Hated the snow, though. Don't miss that.

[0:01:14.3]

PD: Did your family have roots in Detroit, I guess before – beyond your parents or –

[0:01:20.6]

RC: No, not at all. My parents were from – well, my father grew up— was born in Ireland, and moved to New Jersey in 1929. My mother's parents came from Ireland just before that, so they were both really Jersey people. But after the war, the shipyards kind of dried up in the Jersey, New York area, so my father came out to Detroit to work in the car industry.

[0:01:51.2]

PD: All right. And could you talk a little bit about your memories of any meals or recipes or food that your mother used to make, or your grandparents or –

[0:02:01.0]

RC: Yeah, I never knew my grandparents. But my mom, she was a real good baker. She was a very, very good baker. Besides that, the meals were pretty standard, Irish Catholic: spaghetti on Wednesdays, fish on Fridays. But it was all baked fresh. Made big turkey dinners for Thanksgiving and everything from scratch, so it was good food, great food. Not a lot of seafood, surprisingly, in Michigan, unless you're eatin' lake trout.

[0:02:39.0]

PD: [Laughter] And what made your family move to Virginia?

[0:02:43.2]

RC: Well, actually, I came down here to visit. My brother was in the navy, and he had gotten out of the navy and I came down to visit him and just really fell in love with the area. He was in Richmond at the time. Just decided to relocate to warmer weather, so.

[0:03:02.8]

PD: So was that after high school then or –

[0:03:04.0]

RC: Actually, it was during high school. One of my most favorite things to tell to especially my kids was I took American history in Michigan in tenth grade, then I took American history again in Virginia. Two totally different wars went on in that Civil War thing. [Laughter] It was recommended by the counselor when I moved out here that they thought it would be a good experience to take American history in the South. You've already heard one side of the story. So that's how I came down here and then finished high school, then went to college.

[0:03:40.5]

PD: Interesting. And so, was your brother older, then?

[0:03:43.6]

RC: Yeah, he's ten years older.

[0:03:47.0]

PD: So, is that who you stayed with when you came down?

[0:03:48.0]

RC: Yeah, stayed with him.

[0:03:49.9]

PD: And so, what did you do after high school?

[0:03:53.3]

RC: During high school, I started working in restaurants. After high school, I went to college, went to community college and I went through the apprenticeship program at the American Culinary Federation. So, I was kind of doing two schools at once and still working full-time, because you had to work forty hours still during your apprenticeship program. So that kind of took up from nineteen to twenty-two, pretty much [Laughter] most of my time.

[0:04:21.6]

PD: And what, I guess, sparked your interest in food as a career option?

[0:04:25.6]

RC: I guess when I first started, I was sixteen, I was washing dishes and just got to experience some of the – especially food down here, because I'd never had a lot of fish and crab and shrimp before, and it was a seafood restaurant that I first started working at. One of the partners in the restaurant used to make sure the dishwashers always ate well, make sure you feed your dishwashers better than the cooks. So, I would get to try different things. And it was like all of a sudden, it's like, "Well, why don't you try helping us with some of the food?" And then next thing you know, you're cooking, and the next thing you know, one thing leads to another.

[0:05:03.4]

PD: That's interesting. Do you think there was anything unique about you that stood out as someone to bring up in that way? Like, because if you start off as a dishwasher, like, what made you stand out as someone to train?

[0:05:03.4]

RC: Probably because I've always been a hard worker. Still, there's only one speed, and that's full speed. So, I'm always a good learner, quick learner, and the restaurant business is always looking for the next person to step up. Somebody got mad at somebody and left, so somebody's got to fill that job. [Laughter]

[0:05:40.1]

PD: And do you mind sharing, if you remember, the name of that restaurant or the man who kind of –

[0:05:46.0]

RC: It was Trader Ferris restaurant, and it was in Richmond, and John Swartwout was the owner. He was a pretty neat guy. I actually worked for him at two different restaurants 'cause he opened up another restaurant after that, too, so I worked with him for quite a while.

[0:06:05.3]

PD: So, I guess when for you did it become a career option? It seems like you were working there and then you moved up. Did it click in at that point that this was something that you would pursue or –

[0:06:17.5]

RC: Well, I went to school for – I was a double major in business and accounting, so I did externships in accounting, and while I was working and sitting behind a desk and doing accounts receivable, it just wasn't making my day.

[0:06:35.5]

PD: It's a different lifestyle. [Laughter]

[0:06:36.2]

RC: Yeah. So, I think it's everything. You get sucked into restaurants. The excitement of the restaurant business, it's the deadlines twice a day, it's being able to make people happy. So, I think that draw, plus my management background, kept making me run restaurants and manage restaurants. So, it's just a more exciting lifestyle than doing accounts receivable.

[0:07:07.2]

PD: Was there a moment when you realized, I guess, you were making it as a chef, versus you made it at that point, you achieved that status?

[0:07:16.4]

RC: Well, I guess when you get your first full-fledged chef's job, I guess you think, it's a challenge of stepping up, being able to do everything that whoever mentored you – I was an apprentice for the same chef for five years, so it was a three-year apprenticeship and I wanted to stay with him because I really, really enjoyed working with him. He was a Swiss chef and he was a certified butcher and bologna maker in Europe, and a certified executive chef over here. So, he was fascinating, to learn how to make blutwurst and knackwurst. He made everything from scratch. It was an interesting – it's a lost art now.

[0:07:56.6]

PD: Wow.

[0:07:58.2]

RC: So, I worked with him for five years, and the only reason I stopped working was because he moved to Tennessee and I wanted to stay in Virginia.

[0:08:05.3]

PD: Did any of his influence rub off on you in terms of what you're interested in making or –

[0:08:12.7]

RC: Oh, yeah. I think a lot of the – obviously where he grew up was not a lot of seafood, so I was able to help him with some of the seafood. But a lot of the land animals, especially – I mean, like I say, he was a butcher, so not my favorite part, but he would take us out into the – he lived in Powhatan, and people would call him to have him come slaughter their calves or some of their animals, and he would make his apprentices come along with him to watch. [Laughter] It was like, "Oh, I can't look at some of these eyes." [Laughter] But a lot of the European stuff. In fact, then that was all there was, was European chefs. It was in the [19]70s, so the European chefs were the ones that came over to America and started, really, the American culinary revolution. So, it was a lot of the chefs that we did – in the apprenticeship, we would rotate and go to different places, not to work but to learn every Monday. We would go to a place that did ice carvings and work with that chef for the day. So, it was a really great, great experience. But they were all unique unto themselves, from making homemade pastas to, like I said, ice carvings, to butchering. It was all very, very kind of exciting, outside of the normal kitchen work, but it's always influenced. I think it's always been back to basics, the basics in food. And

that's what I keep trying to work with new people and young people now, is, "Don't forget your basics."

[0:09:54.9]

PD: And this is kind of jumping ahead, but you mentioned the –

[background noise]

[0:10:09.0]

PD: You mentioned that it was predominantly European chefs who were doing all these things, and I'm wondering when you saw that shift or the embrace of like, American, like, culinary food, especially being in a place in Virginia that's very historic. Were you a part of embracing American cuisine as, like, a legitimate artform, so to speak, versus, like, these European influences?

[0:10:34.2]

RC: Oh, yeah, it was a definite shift. In fact, when I was in the middle [19]70s was when we were doing the apprenticeship program and everything, there was only a couple of culinary schools in the United States: Hyde Park, at the CIA, then there was culinary schools out in California. They were very, very hard and expensive to get into. So, when you got to work with – and I got to work with some of the graduates from the CIA shortly while I was still in Richmond – but then when coming down here, the real shift, I think, started probably in the middle [19]80s with the Nouvelle Cuisine, and that was heavily

influenced by Marcel Desaulniers at The Trellis. That was probably the first chef that I ever saw that I worked with – or didn't work with, but back then it was just Berret's and The Trellis. Those were the only two restaurants in Merchants Square, believe it or not. [Laughter] Now there's like twelve. But going to his restaurant, trying his food, and then Nouvelle Cuisine was just starting, with sauces on the bottom of plates. Europeans were always sauce over everything, whereas it was starting more of a presentation of foods. I mean, I was blown away when I first went into The Trellis back then and saw the food that he was doing. It was really . . . and me and Marcel were never – he's retired or sold The Trellis a few years ago. We would always run into each other and I would always ask him advice about things because he wrote many cookbooks, and fifteen years ago I was doing a cookbook. So, I would stop by and say – we were never adversaries, but we were never really – we didn't go out and have a beer together or anything. But he was a big influence on, I think, the American cuisine in Virginia, as well as Williamsburg. He's still around. [Laughter] He's semi-retired, but he gets his hands on things.

[0:12:39.2]

Jessica Taylor: How long had he been working there when you came around?

[0:12:41.9]

RC: How long –

[0:12:44.2]

JT: Had he been working there at The Trellis? Or I guess he owned it, right? Yeah.

[0:12:47.0]

RC: Him and Tom Powers and John Curtis, I think opened it in 1982.

[0:12:53.9]

JT: And you came here when?

[0:12:54.9]

RC: In [19]85. They were about three or four years, had been open maybe three or four years before I came here. I came here. Tom Austin and partners opened this, bought this restaurant from Berret **Violet** who was a local contractor. As usual, local contractors think it'd be a neat idea to open a restaurant, until it drains all your money and then you decide you need to sell it. [Laughter] So, he opened Berret's in 1983, and then sold it to the partnership in late 1984, and then they closed it for about three or four months for the renovation, opened it in April, and I came in August of that year. So, yeah, The Trellis, I think, was in 1980.

[0:13:52.3]

JT: Did you have a sense, when you started working here, how Virginia cuisine was different from other areas, especially, like, New York or, like, California, where there's like a definite, like, food scene?

[0:14:05.2]

RC: Not back then, I don't think. There wasn't the interaction, or especially you think about the differences from 1985 to now. There was no social media, there was no Food Network, there was no – [Laughter] If you got to see anything on TV, like Wolfgang Puck or something, or you got to see anything, or *Iron Chef*, it was like one of the first things that you could actually – in fact, when *Iron Chef* started, it came out at like 11:30 at night, which is perfect because that's when all of us are getting off work, right? So, there was always books, was our greatest influence back then. So, I mean, you'd get cookbooks from different areas, whether it was Texas or California, or the fusion food of the Northwest. New York— my relatives were from New York, New Jersey area, so we would visit there quite frequently. But I never thought New York's food was – it was pretty meat and potatoes, and high end, a lot of it. But a lot of the seafood that they – if it's not coastal above them from Canada, it's brought from down here, which is always still a battle, because everything else is softshell season right now. And the New York people will pay serious high dollars for softshell crabs, when we've got to try to stop the trucks from going up there to give us our share. But we won't pay as much because we can't charge what they charge up there. So, there's a little bit of rivalry going on, going up and down [Interstate] 95 with our seafood from Virginia. But like I say, influences back then were mainly books, and there was no social media . . . unless you were creating something, took something you saw and tried to deconstruct it or make it different or do something with it or just– back then, I think all of our minds were more creative. That's what I try to tell my chefs now. I say, "You guys have got to be the creative ones, because I'm just the greatest hits now." [Laughter] I'm sixty years old. I'm not as

creative as I was. That's why I kind of force my chefs to be involved with food, be more creative. This is your time. This is your time.

[0:16:40.3]

JT: Do you have an example of that when you were, like, first starting out and being mentored, where you were the creative one, like the young blood coming in?

[0:16:51.7]

RC: Yeah. My chef that I apprenticed under, I used to be able to come up with all the specials, and all I was asking for was product. If het could get me veal, and he would break down a leg of veal, then I would come up with somewhat of a different type of Veal Oscar or something like that, or something that's still somewhat traditional, but with a twist. And he used to let me just go crazy, and do whatever I wanted pretty much. As long as it sold and we made money on it, he was happy. [Laughter] But I think it was kind of – he wasn't as old as I am right now at the time, but it was kind of his way of saying, "You take this from me. I've already done this and I need to step aside." It was kind of cool.

[0:17:40.4]

PD: I wanted to ask, what brought you to Berret's? Like, how did you get involved in taking over?

[0:17:47.9]

RC: I had a restaurant in Petersburg for two years previous to that, 'cause I was in Richmond for about ten years, and I decided I'd open a restaurant in Petersburg. The lease had come to an end after two years. I wanted to kind of get out of that area and come back down. My brother had moved from Richmond down to Newport News, so I came down here to Newport News just kind of on a whim, basically, and would visit him for a while and then we drove by Berret's and saw, we drove by Merchants Square a little bit. There wasn't much in Merchants Square then. And then I noticed an ad in the paper for a chef at Berret's. I said, "Wow, I saw that place. It was right on the corner." So, I called Tom and I set up an appointment, set up an interview with him, and at the time I really wasn't looking for a job. I'd just stopped, I'd just closed a restaurant, so I was going to take a few months off. But it was the middle of the summer and they had a need, and it was a neat place. I said, "Let's kind of see what happens." Then I came in as a sous chef, and the chef that was here at the time left in October. I came in late August. He wanted to move on. It just wasn't really his cup of tea. He was a Jewish chef that did not know much about Virginia seafood, so it was kind of not a good mix, but he left on good terms and I took over, and that was 1985. So, it's been a long haul. [Laughter]

[0:19:28.1]

PD: Before we get to Berret's, you mentioned your restaurant in Petersburg. I was wondering if you could describe what was the food you were making, like what was the theme of that restaurant, I guess, so to speak, or –

[0:19:40.8]

RC: That was a time in my life when I was twenty-five years old and I wanted to open up a rock 'n roll venue with food, so that's what I did. So, in Virginia at that time, you could only get a beer license, especially if you're doing live music. Actually, to go back a second to Trader Ferris when I first worked there, it was the first sit-down bar in Virginia that had a bar stool. That was 1976. They passed the law, as they do legislation every year and laws are going to go into effect July 1. Well, they renovated this restaurant, Trader Ferris, in May, and built this beautiful bar around it and opened it in June, but couldn't put a bar stool there for the entire month until it got to be July 1. On July 1, they got to put bar stools around it, the first bar in Virginia to have a bar, because back then you couldn't sit at a bar. If you wanted to get up from the bar and move to a table, you couldn't pick up your drink and move it to the table. You had to have the server pick up your drink and take it to the table. Virginia laws are still very difficult, but they've loosened up quite a bit since then. But it was a good year, a good experience. It was two years of live music five and six days a week, and the food was what you would think of bar food back then: nachos and club sandwiches and pizza, things like that. So, it was more of an experience to fulfill a dream of owning a rock 'n roll bar, but after two years, I was pretty much done that that. [Laughter] I wanted to get back into real food and get more into— away from that kind of style of restaurant.

[0:21:35.7]

PD: Was it also your first experience, I guess, making more executive decisions in terms of working with distributors or finding sources for your food, I guess, or –

[0:21:46.0]

RC: Well, a little bit before that was more the food processing, ordering. I'd been in the business seven or eight years by that time, so I was already had kind of run a couple of restaurants already. Even though I was an apprentice, I was still in charge of ordering all the food and doing that kind of thing. The experience in Petersburg led me more towards understanding more about the front of the house and also the government, with getting licensing for alcohol, getting licensing for businesses, doing that kind of taxing kind of things, dealing with people who only work Monday through Friday from 9:00 to 5:00 and really make no decisions on Fridays. [Laughter] "How am I going to get anything done here?" So, it was more administrative overall, opening a restaurant, and then so . . . that's changed. But after I got to Berret's, Tom and I, we opened up two other restaurants besides that, so the experience of opening restaurants was fresh. It's a very organized, methodical way to do things, open restaurants.

[0:22:57.5]

PD: What would you say, at least for this area, maybe, opening those restaurants, were some of the, I guess, largest difficulties, or if there are any that come to mind?

[0:23:09.0]

RC: Hmm. I don't think there's – I can't think of anything that would prohibit – we never built a building. We always leased the building. So, I can't think – there was no real – nothing that – not anticipated, I guess, would be – the usual landlord situation where they

promise you the world and don't fulfill on all the promises, kind of thing, but that's kind of almost expected.

[0:23:47.1]

PD: And what was your position when you got here versus, like, what you are now?

[0:23:51.0]

RC: I came in, like I said, I came in as the PM sous chef for two months, and then when he left, I took over as executive chef.

[0:24:02.4]

PD: And was Berret's a seafood restaurant back then, too?

[0:24:07.3]

RC: Oh, yes, always has been.

[0:24:10.9]

PD: And talking about that, what was either the demand from the community or the food you were serving? Is it the same as it kind of is now, or was what people wanted different, or where you were getting it from different, if that makes sense?

[0:24:27.6]

RC: Yeah, it does. Back then, I think there was a lot more availability, local seafood, for one thing. I mean, I remember times when we would have nothing that was frozen. I mean, shrimp and everything was fresh. It was great. You'd go from basically May until late September where you would have nothing frozen. And then, we went through the oyster crisis. It just seems like there's less Virginia product, much less Virginia product now than there was back then. And demand from the people, that's what they grew up with back then. You got crabmeat. You had local crabmeat. You made crab cakes from Hastings and Poquoson. [Laughter] You knew everybody. You knew all the characters and the shrimp people coming up from Carolina every three, four days they were coming up, bringing you scallops. They were always landing at Wicomoco. The fish were always fresh. There was no such thing as I.Q.F. [Individually Quick Frozen] fish from wherever that's from. So, it was a lot more back to basics with seafood. I think that's always – we've always preached: seafood's greatest, at its best, is don't mess with it so much. Doesn't need to have all this glitz and glamour. Seafood is awesome. I mean, it is. Nothing better than fresh lump crabmeat, fresh shrimp, right? That's the key, is to not overdress it. Then you don't wind up tasting what you're ordering. So, the evolution, I think everything has evolved to the point – the greatest thing, I think, that's come back is the oyster, the Virginia oyster. For the longest time, it was like, "Oh, my God, there's no oysters." The James River shut down for years and years and years. And it's funny, I think the stigma still of James River oysters – she was mentioning, the photographer, she comes here all the time and has oysters and likes the York River better than the James River. And it's funny, you go places. I've been up in New York, I've been places, and the oyster bars, they'll have James River oysters on feature. People around here, they won't

eat a James River oyster. [Laughter] "I'm not eatin' James River oysters. I'll eat York River oysters, I won't James River." So, it still has a bad stigma, but you'll see, "James River oysters from Virginia." I say, "Yeah, nobody in Virginia eats those things." But we sell a lot of 'em because we get a lot of tourists. So, I mean, there's been shifts and tides, and it's been not all good, not all bad either. I mean, I think the Save the Swordfish campaign worked in the [19]80s and [19]90s, but it took chefs to stop buying it. Don't buy it. If they won't buy it, they won't fish it. So, there is some influence, but I think overall the seafood is still – a crab cake is still a crab cake, everybody still loves peel-and-eat shrimp. So, I mean – we do 80 percent of our sales are seafood, and I think it's a harder product to deal with. I think if you look at a lot of the restaurants, they'll have one or two seafood items on it, but they'd rather stay with their land food, and it's more economical and you make more money off of that, and seafood is not – but it's one of the reasons why I think good seafood restaurants stay in business so long, because people can't go to Fresh Market, and it costs the same as if you're going to go home and make it as it does to come here. You're going to go in and buy a pound of lump crab meat, and then you're going to make it, then you've got the mess, and you're going to wind up spending the same amount of money as if you came here. So, I think that's one of the reasons why seafood restaurants always have a longer staying power. But you have to do your non-seafood items real well, too, because we always say – we always say, we do this with our servers – is there's bound to be one out of four people dragged to a seafood restaurant that don't eat seafood. We had a couple of tables tonight, all of them had chicken and steaks. It's like, well, "I'm glad they came here. Still, they came here." So, I think seafood's not— maybe not as – it's in a good place. I don't think it's in a great

place, but I think it's getting better. I think it's turned a tide. Regulations are now starting to work, but pricing is still extremely expensive for seafood.

[0:29:29.8]

PD: It makes me think of two questions. The first question is, we talked to a lot of the watermen and people who are directly affected by the changes in populations and regulations, and a big question that I want to ask you is, as a seafood restaurant, how do you adapt when during the oyster crisis or when prices – with them going up to New York, or I guess starting in the [19]80s, how do you adapt when these things happen? How are ways you're able to find success and get that food on the table?

[0:30:03.5]

RC: Yeah. I think some of the ways we dealt with it, especially in the [19]80s, is you find smaller people. You find smaller farmers, you find individuals who maybe don't have those connections with New York, with the Washington, D.C. markets, and they're just doing it as a sideline or they're just doing it for a short season, whether you've got the softshell crab guy now turns into – he's a clammer after he gets done with the softshell season. So, you try to keep your niche. I think you try to develop a relationship to the point where it's more convenient for them to deal with us than it is to deal with somebody who's going to be a middle man down the road. They're going to have to sell it to a wholesaler, so the wholesaler can move it to the next people. So, I think you try to almost bond a friendship with them and say – and the good thing, I think, with us here at Berret's, is because of our location, our prices are more expensive than a lot of other

places, so we can afford to pay more for a product that might slip through us. If it's more convenient for them to sell us softshell crabs for twenty-five dollars a dozen right now, rather than get thirty dollars a dozen but they've got to drive them to D.C., they stay with us. And the first ones, we've always kind of told people that are doing those things over the years, I mean, a lot of 'em give us the call first. "When shad roe first comes in, give us a call. We want to be the first ones. And you know we pay top dollar for the product." So, they do. But you got to find little niches to make sure the product doesn't leave the area, whether it's seafood or produce or whatever. So, I think there's been a lot of shift in that, and I think the more you get wholesalers involved, the more greedy they get. So, the pricing goes up even more for them to move the product out of the area. They want to give the watermen less money than they were giving them last year, but they want to charge more because they want to make more. So, I think the biggest thing is just to develop relationships with them.

[0:32:24.9]

PD: Have you found – or do you have any examples of concrete ways you're able to build those relationships or organizations or situations that allow you to kind of develop those relationships better, or I guess ways that it's been successful for you?

[0:32:40.7]

RC: Over the years, I think we've had a lot of people that have – we used to have a local crab man, crab picker, and he'd go buy bushels of crabs and he had his pickers and everything. It was actually Mr. Smith, believe it or not. For years, I mean. We always

kidded he never picked a crab in his life, but he brought us crab meat three times a week. He passed away about ten years ago.

[0:33:08.7]

PD: What was his first name? Mr. Smith?

[0:33:10.1]

RC: I can't remember I just called him Mr. Smith because he was a very old gentleman. [Laughter] He was one of those people that always had the cigarette hanging out of his mouth, always had the ash was about this long and never fell off. [Laughter] You think, "How did he do that?" So, like I say, over the years now, Tommy Leggett is probably our – he came on board with us doing oysters probably about five or six years ago. He's been doing it for longer than that, but we kind of wanted to stay with his oyster, feature his oyster here at Berret's. So, he's kind of the latest of our watermen. Eastfield Farms in Mathews and Peter Perina and his wife used to bring us oysters and strawberries. [Laughter] And I think they're retired now. So, over the course of years, you kind of – George Franklin in Gloucester was bringing us oysters and oysters and oysters forever. He's retired. So, I mean, as these people retire, you've got to try to replace them with new people that are – so, I mean, we probably had two or three different calls today from people who are doing their own softshells. "I want to bring some buy tomorrow and show you." Okay, yeah, let's see. Because it's time for a new relationship. But, it's hard work. You know. You've talked to these watermen. It's hard work. It's not for the faint of heart and their whole work can be wiped out in one tide. So, I give 'em a lot of credit for doing

what they do. We deal with people like MJM now, with Russ Gibbons, is a local small wholesaler who's able to get with local people. He was a chef and also was a local chef for twenty years, so he had his own connections for people, and now he's a wholesaler now. So, he calls me two, three times a week, "I've got rockfish coming in. I've got this coming in." So, you kind of get a network going a little bit. But you've got to plant the seed with them. They always know who to call when they want to move something, and as busy as we are, it's always a good call, because they can sell us a fair amount of product and get it off their shelf.

[0:35:42.2]

PD: Kind of a follow-up is, we don't get to talk to a lot of people who get to be in this side of the food industry, in terms of the seafood. There's statistics that show a lot of the watermen, like the average age of the watermen in Mathews is sixty-two, and that it's aging, with decreasing, fluctuating populations, regulations. There's things that for various reasons are threatening this as, like, a viable career in some people's eyes. And I was wondering, is there an impression that the seafood restaurant industry in Virginia, is there any concern or anticipation or effects of that being felt that this is something that's, like, the people doing the work of fishing is kind of decreased, like it's a smaller pool? Is that something that – is that being picked up on by, I guess, restaurants or chefs? I'm just wondering if there's a relationship –

[0:36:40.9]

RC: I think there is. I think, once again, it's really hard work, and, I don't think it's as generational as it was, as it used to be thirty, forty years ago. You wanted to be like your dad and be a waterman, you wanted to work on the water. I think that has certainly changed. I think some of the encouraging parts about it, though, is seeing some of the young, like, VIMS graduates that are working the water and then starting aquaculture on their own end. So that's encouraging to see that there's a younger – but it's like anything else. I think there's going to be a wave of in and out, but you hope that if there's a core group that stays together, that generationally passes it down to each other and stays in the business. Right now, I would say we haven't seen a decline. Like with Mr. Smith, you see the aging out and the not replacing of, but then once in a while you get somebody else in there who's in their thirties and forties, who's starting and deciding they want to go out on the water and be watermen. So, I think there'll be some fluctuation always in that.

[0:38:08.8]

PD: And my last follow-up to this, this is just a train of thought I'm trying to just finish out, is, have there been ways you've struggled with balancing staying locally sourced versus not, or ways to kind of advocate informally for the watermen and the fishermen of Virginia? Because I imagine it's tempting to source from – if there's other – I'm trying to think of the best way to communicate this. Like, the competition of other places, if there're cheaper prices, is there a balance of trying to support local fishermen, the local industry, and also running a business, I guess?

[0:38:50.8]

RC: Yeah. In the [19]80s, we would always – we were a regional seafood restaurant, and the region has gotten bigger every year, it seems like. [Laughter] It's not just regional Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, North Carolina, anymore. It has to expand. Just the crab industry was so devastated for years, and you got people who want crab cakes, so what are you going to do? You know? You've got to – in the middle of January when someone comes in and says, "Is your lump crabmeat from Virginia?" Obviously not because it's twelve degrees outside and nobody's crabbing, and the crabs aren't even crabbing. They're underneath the sand. They're hiding. [Laughter] They're not even here. But you got to be twelve months out of the year, so you have to stay as loyal to the region as you can, within reason. It's like anything else. I mean, if it's not available, you have to find another source. But as soon as it's available, you get back to it, because you have to. It's not about – it's just the right thing to do. It's not like, you can't run out there and just look for the cheapest product available, 'cause it's going to show. People are going to know. But it is. The region has gotten bigger and bigger and bigger. You think of how much salmon we sell. I mean, we sell probably 250 pounds of salmon a week, of filets. Well, we don't have salmon here. You got to go to Canada to get salmon. [Laughter] Same with shrimp. We don't have shrimp. I mean, we have some shrimp, but. So, you got to get people what they want, but, yeah, obviously take care of our own here in Virginia. It's number one. It's where it's nice to see when the softshells come in and the oysters, because it gets you back with faces of people who, that's who you know, that's who you like to deal with.

[0:41:03.9]

JT: I'm not asking you to trash anybody, but how does that compare to other restaurants, um, like the responsibility to watermen and, um, to local seafood to say that this is local consistently?

[0:41:14.0]

RC: Well, I think there's two different kinds of restaurants. In the first place, there're locally owned restaurants, which we are, or there's not locally owned restaurants that loyalty is to whoever's making corporate decisions in Corpus Christi. Once again, I think it's people who can afford to pay for the seafood, The Trellis and Blue Talon and people in Merchants Square, because we're fairly expensive restaurants, so they'll stay local. They'll stay within – and they're locally owned restaurants, you know, **David's quantum** of restaurants over there sell fresh product, just like we do. So, I think there's two different kinds of restaurants here. If you're going to go to Captain George's and expect a lump crab cake, nothing to be – a lot of people like Captain George's. I've never set foot in one. [Laughter] But I'm not a buffet person, so a lot of people go there and enjoy it, so I mean, so there's nothing wrong with it, but it's not the kind of restaurant we are. It's not the kind of seafood we try to portray, but there's nothing wrong with it. Obviously, people like it and they go there a lot. [Laughter] So I think there's two different styles of restaurants and who's making the decision and whose philosophy is behind the decision-making. Is it all about money? If it's all about money, you're not going to last thirty-three years in a restaurant. You got to make decisions based on doing the right thing for the right reasons. If you do all that, you're going to still make money, just not make as much, but what the hell? You got to do what you love and do it for the right reasons, yeah. I

don't eat seafood at a lot of restaurants, if that answers your question. [Laughter] I do if I know the chef, or I do if – I eat seafood all the time here, so a lot of times I go out. I don't go to steak places either because I can cook a steak at home, too. But I'll go out and I'll eat other people's – what they consider their specialty. But, seafood, yeah, it's a trust thing, too. You got to trust who's preparing it and who's buying it and how they're handling it. You can get pretty sick. My mother basically passed away from food poisoning, from eating clams. They were cross-contaminated and they wound up destroying her liver. It was about a four-year duration of time. But that's how seriously you got to take seafood. And she didn't eat seafood. Shrimp cocktail was about it for her. Like I say, she grew up in the time and era when it was cute to get a shrimp cocktail when you went out to a fancy restaurant. But give me the steak. So, it's very serious how seafood is handled, and you go back to the people you're buying it from, with HACCP programs with all of the major wholesalers, but you can't have somebody walking up to your back door with a cooler full of fish and say, "Hey, want to buy some rockfish?" How much ice has been on that? How long has it been out of the water? I mean, you can look at a fish all day long, look at the gills and see if it's red and everything like that, but how long has that fish been out of the water? Are you a licensed fisherman? So, I don't buy anything from a truck or a pickup truck coming in the back door saying – I don't know where you got this, where it's from. Still, there's somewhat – I don't know a lot about the politics of seafood, but it seems in some areas that it's overregulated in some areas are underregulated in some areas, and these people driving around selling stuff out of the back of their cars is an area that – [Laughter] Yeah, but who's supposed to police that? So, we, as chefs, have to police that. You're taking the money out of a local

fisherman who is licensed by doing that, so you don't want to burn that bridge, because that's a strong tie, but there's a lot of people that pull up to the back door and say, "I got a couple cases of shrimp." But there's no ice on 'em and you drove all the way from North Carolina? Hmm. [Laughter] So anyway.

[0:45:51.0]

PD: Talking about giving people what they want and being in a place like Colonial Williamsburg, the idea of the authentic experience, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what people coming here as a seafood restaurant in Virginia, what the authentic experience is that people want to encounter in terms of, like, what they want the food to be here or if that's changed.

[0:46:19.5]

RC: Hmm. I think the biggest difference probably from us out here in Merchants Square than from the colonial area is people don't expect us to be colonial. If they go down to Chowning's or Shields, they expect somebody, big gown and all of that stuff and expect the Brunswick Stew and all the authentic old American recipes. I don't think, we've never felt that here. There is always the feeling if you're going to do traditional seafood, you got – and we still do traditional seafood when it comes to crab cakes or things like that, baked oysters, scalloped oysters, things like that, because people – we want to hold true to – we don't want people to forget those dishes either – we're probably less than 15, 20 percent of our menu is tied to what would be considered Old Virginia fare or anything like that. I think they expect us to be more innovational with our food. So, it's got to be

hard down in the colonial district for them guys, because people expect that, but then when they get it, they're not really knowing what they're getting. [Laughter] They don't know what that means. [Laughter]

[0:47:39.3]

PD: So, what do you see your role being here, like where you're located? Like you're saying you have the historic district and you're here. How do you fit into this area? It's still historic. You still have these Virginia influences. How do you see what's your role, I guess, so to speak, is a better way to describe that?

[0:47:57.9]

RC: Over the years, I think we've figured out, kind of figured out what we are, and that is we're the local seafood restaurant, hopefully that people recommend, whether it's from the concierge and the B&Bs and all that. We've tried to stay – we're still very involved. We have College of William & Mary on this side, we've got Colonial Williamsburg down on this side, and we've always felt like we got a lot of different people to somewhat attract. And then of course, you're thinking of the people who are coming from Boise to Williamsburg and want to eat seafood, that they're going to want crab cakes or they're going to want the fried shrimp or they're – so they want still the traditional foods that they thought they were coming into. You don't want to intimidate people with seafood, especially if they're not familiar with it. So, we try to buy good product, prepare it simply, and don't overstate it and don't have presumptuous servers running around acting like 'cause you don't know what something is that you're a dumbass. [Laughter] You just

came here to eat and experience some seafood. Some of our – I think our responsibility are we hold true on our menus. Our menus, we do have what we consider Berret's classics. We have five dishes that have been on the menu basically thirty years, and we will never – because if you take any of them off, people are going to get mad. Then we have an area that's called seasonal, so we try to change with the season at least five or six of the entrées. Then we have the non-seafood items. Then we have our appetizers. So, we try to blend everything together and say, "You came to Berret's twenty years ago and you got the crab cakes, you're coming back this year because you're bringing – you graduate." We've got so much of this now. You know I'm getting old when this happens. People who worked here when they were at William & Mary and now they're bringing their kids to William & Mary to start school. But we have Berret's crab cakes eighteen years ago, and now they come in to have that same crab cake. It's the same crab cake. So, you got that responsibility, but you also have a responsibility to have new and different stuff, keep an eye on what different fish are now available. Can't just keep doing the same thing. When you get complacent is when you need to get out of the business, and you got to keep – that's what gets you excited, coming up with new stuff. But you better have those crab cakes. [Laughter] But it is. Over the years, it's been kind of very interesting to see people come back, and if their kids come to work here, we tell 'em what kind of hellion their dad and mother used to be when they were at William & Mary. [Laughter]

[0:51:08.1]

PD: It's really interesting to hear that you're balancing the colonial influence and the Virginia Tidewater influence, but also having your own legacy being here thirty years. You kind of have made it, like, you're your own unique thing. It sounds like there's a point where you don't have to try to fit in, where, like, you kind of have your own space in that, what people expect to get out of the area. You don't have to, like, pretend or try to adapt anymore. Like, you've – does that make sense? And so, I guess my question is, moving forward, now that you have this own legacy and you've kind of found this market that works for you, what do you see or what do you hope for the future of the restaurant to be?

[0:51:51.2]

RC: Hopefully keep moving forward, I mean, keeping the same vein of what we're moving, but keep your ear to the customer. And that's why I think with social media now, is so important, with people's reactions. Used to be someone left and didn't tell you they were unhappy, you never knew they were unhappy. Well, if they're unhappy now, they get on Trip Advisor or Yelp or somebody, and they'll let you know they weren't happy when they were here – or OpenTable. So, you got to keep listening to people, but still stay true, like I said. Still want people to –

[Interruption]

[0:52:53.5]

RC: Where were we?

[0:52:54.6]

PD: Thinking of the future.

[0:52:56.3]

RC: Oh, yeah. Well, once again, keep moving forward, but keeping the classics held, just hopefully never be complacent. That's the big thing, keep moving.

[0:53:20.9]

JT: I want to, um, before we end, I wanted to ask you to describe a specific dish, seafood dish that you like to surprise people with, that you, like, consider innovative, that you're serving now.

[0:53:32.9]

RC: Well, every month we come up with a Monday through Friday special, and this month we're doing a – it's a red snapper. It's a lemon peppercorn Parmesan-crusted red snapper that we sear it and bake it, finish it, and we do a grilled buttery shrimp with it, serve it over creamy polenta with asparagus, and we have honey mustard glaze that goes over all of it. It's been real popular, and it was just kind of something I came up with just before we started this past month. It's a good time of year for red snapper, and then, of course, everybody loves shrimp. It's one of the things we try to do a lot of, because we don't concentrate one seafood in a dish. If you look at our menus, we try to put combinations. I love scallops, but I get bored eating scallops if I'm just going to eat

scallops. I like to eat scallops and I like to maybe have some fish with it or shrimp or crabmeat or something like that. So, we try to put a lot of combinations of different seafoods together. That way you're not just eating scallops. Love scallops, but after a while, they get a little monotonous.

[0:54:48.7]

JT: It's a texture thing for me, yeah.

[0:54:48.7]

PD: All right. Well, I think that's all the questions we have. Is there anything we didn't cover you can think of?

[0:54:59.2]

RC: No, it's been fun, interesting. Over the years, there's two people here – well, really there's one person here that's been here the entire time that I've been here, Tom Austin's wife who still works here. He passed away in 2015. She still works in the office upstairs. So, it's fun, there's always someone I can go to and say, "Do you remember such-and-such?" [Laughter] "Yeah, yeah, yeah." There's a lot of people who've been here – well, there's two people. There's another pantry lady who works, who's retiring this year. She's sixty-two now, and she was twenty-seven when I started here, too. So, it's been kind of an interesting . . . people start to, "Do you remember such-and-such?" "Yeah." So, it's been a long ride, it's been a great ride, and Berret's been a fun place.

[0:55:50.7]

JT: Yeah. And you mentor people now, too.

[0:55:52.2]

RC: Yeah.

[0:55:53.9]

JT: Yeah. What do you want for the young chefs coming up?

[0:55:57.8]

RC: Don't forget their roots, stay to the base. Even in the culinary schools, some of 'em are getting away from teaching the basics, and they're just moving past it. I don't think you can build a foundation or build a career without the foundation, and they need to get back to saying, "You make Hollandaise sauce like this," and, "You make the mother sauces." They're skipping over some of that. That's kind of very disappointing, because I don't want that stuff to go away, and if you start taking this generation, having it go away, then pretty soon it's going to go away. It's going to be like the dial tone. Nobody knows what a dial tone is anymore. [Laughter]

[0:56:41.7]

PD: I never thought about that. [Laughter]

[0:56:43.6]

JT: Yeah.

[0:56:44.8]

RC: So, it's keeping 'em – because food is basic. That's what we tell people. People didn't come here to argue, they didn't come here to fight. They came here because they were hungry. They wanted some seafood. So, let's do everything we can for 'em.

[0:57:02.6]

PD: I guess my last question would be, what are your reflections on, I guess, the success you've had the past thirty-five years? Looking back on the legacy, how does that make you feel or are you, like, proud of that accomplishment?

[0:57:16.5]

RC: Oh, yeah, very proud of it. It's not like, it didn't come with a lot of bumps, bumps in the road. I mean, there's been a lot of – with the economy over the years, with employees, whether it's – so it's not like every day is not important. Every day is important to do the best you can for every day. I don't look back on it as being this magnificent success. This has been a labor – it's a labor of love, but it's a very important to keep focusing on the fact that it could all be gone in a day if you let it. But, yeah, of course I'm very proud of everything we've done, we've accomplished over the years.

[0:58:06.0]

PD: All right. Well, I think that's all the questions we have. I just want to thank you so much, Mr. Carr, for talking with us tonight.

[0:58:10.2]

RC: Sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]