



**Martha Foose  
Greenwood, Mississippi**

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Location: Martha Foose's Residence, Greenwood, MS  
Interviewer: Rien Fertel  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 1 hour, 33 minutes  
Project: Women Cookbook Writers

**[Begin Martha Foose Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Rien Fertel:** All right this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is just after noon on March 21<sup>st</sup>, a Wednesday. I'm in Greenwood, Mississippi at the home of Martha Foose. And I'm going to have her introduce herself please.

**00:00:18**

**Martha Foose:** My name is Martha Hall Foose. I was born on December 20, 1967. [***Dog Barking***]

**00:00:26**

**Rien Fertel:** We're going to have some dogs and cats too in the background. [***Laughs***]

**00:00:28**

**Martha Foose:** He doesn't like anything in our airspace—air traffic controller dog.

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**Rien Fertel:** What's his name?

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**Martha Foose:** Dude.

**00:00:36**

**Rien Fertel:** Dude, okay. You've lived all over the country, you've traveled the world—when people ask where you're from how do you introduce the Delta? What do you tell them the Delta is?

**00:00:48**

**Martha Foose:** I've found that in any sort of overseas travel, for the most part, when that whole idea of America is generally people automatically associate it with the South. So if it's music, when they think American, it's Southern music. When they think, what's American literature, it's automatically Southern literature. So the concept of the South is one thing and then the Delta, I start generally like, "Well, it's halfway between Memphis and New Orleans." And even people that are from Mississippi, when you say you're from the Delta it's like being from a separate walled-off place.

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**Rien Fertel:** In a stigmatized way or in a negative way?

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**Martha Foose:** It depends on who you're talking to. I think in the current political climate it's thought of as worse than Haiti. In a cultural context, everybody in Mississippi claims what came out of the Delta. So I think that's it's kind of like the red-headed stepchild. It's great for laughs but when it comes down to it, nobody really wants to deal with it.

**00:02:25**

**Rien Fertel:** Um—

**00:02:26**

**Martha Foose:** I'm going to grab a jacket.

**00:02:26**

**Rien Fertel:** Sure; sure, sure, yeah. We just had lunch and you described Mississippi as a club not a state, and I've read that somewhere where you've said that too. What do you mean by that? And how long have you been thinking that or saying that and did you pick it up from somewhere else?

**00:02:50**

**Martha Foose:** I've just always heard that. My mama always says it. I don't know how said it first but I think it completely applies that—just when we sat down it's like, "Oh, I know Mark." And I think that's one of the big advantages, is the idea that somebody always knows somebody. And I was trying to explain this to a friend that lives in Chicago that, let's say, some writer comes to town or photographer comes to town and you're a huge fan. Well there are 100 people clamoring to talk to that person. It's like when they come here it's easy access I guess [*Laughs*]. But I just find people really cherish that aspect of no matter what happens you know somebody that knows somebody that can help you out, or if you need advice, or if you need anything from a mechanic to anything that you need there's somebody that knows somebody that can help you out with it.

**00:04:13**

And I think that's one of the things when you're on the bottom of the list of everything, that that's something that I think Mississippians really hold dear is this idea that we're all in it together. We might be on the bottom but we're all in the bottom together.

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**Rien Fertel:** You mean bottom ranking-wise, how—?

**00:04:34**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, everything.

**00:04:36**

**Rien Fertel:** Where were you born?

**00:04:38**

**Martha Foose:** Yazoo City.

**00:04:40**

**Rien Fertel:** Tell me about Yazoo City. How do you describe the place? How would you introduce it?

**00:04:46**

**Martha Foose:** Well now it's vibrantly painted with strange music blaring down the loudspeakers downtown. It was still a thriving functional city when I was in elementary school, it's when we lived there. What do they say: "It's half hills, half Delta, all crazy." Because it is that,

it's a weird town. And Greenwood is kind of the same thing because you come right off of the Loess Bluff, which drops you down to the Delta, so Greenwood, also a Yazoo River town, you get sort of that Hill Country situation and then it comes smack up into the Delta and so it is that half hills, half Delta, all crazy situation. Both Yazoo City and Greenwood are a lot alike in that way.

**00:05:43**

**Rien Fertel:** Do your roots go back in Yazoo City or in the Delta for—?

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah. My mother's quite the genealogy buff. Excuse me, I'm going to let the cat out. Was Cindy Vaughan, and her family is from Vaughan, Mississippi where Casey Jones had his famous wreck at the 382. And my dad's family has been out at Pluto Plantation, which is the family homestead since the late 1870s, 1880s.

**00:06:22**

**Rien Fertel:** And what did they do growing up? What was their profession?

**00:06:24**

**Martha Foose:** My father's side of the family was farmers, started catfish farming in 1958, one of the kind of pioneers of that industry, my Uncle Bobby Thompson. And my mom's side of the family, her dad was the hotel manager at the King Edward Hotel in downtown Jackson during World War II when all the troops were shipping out, and he had been the manager of the Alcazar

Hotel in Clarksdale. And her mom taught fifth grade for fifty years in Yazoo City. And my dad's mother Elsie Foose was a phlebotomist.

**00:07:12**

**Rien Fertel:** What is that?

**00:07:12**

**Martha Foose:** The study of blood, like a lab technician or medical thing. She had wanted to go to medical school but in the [19]40s in Mississippi that wasn't really a thing many ladies did. She would have made a great doctor. And my father was a family practitioner and went back and got his specialty in emergency medicine, and now he works at the Tribal Hospital on the Choctaw Reservation in Choctaw, Mississippi and opened a wound care clinic because they have such problem with diabetes. My dad says their arms and legs are falling off like pecan limbs.

**00:07:54**

**Rien Fertel:** Is it pro-bono work or it's like post-retirement work that—?

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**Martha Foose:** No, he's seventy-five and still actively practicing there on the reservation.

**00:08:02**

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

**00:08:04**

**Martha Foose:** And my mother teaches French hand sewing for the National Needle Arts Guild and teaches sewing and children's clothing construction all over the world.

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**Rien Fertel:** Really?

**00:08:25**

**Martha Foose:** And I have a brother who works as a trainer for restaurant management.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay. Growing up, was your family a food family? Was there food on the stove? Was there cooking being done?

**00:08:42**

**Martha Foose:** Yes. Both my parents worked full-time. My Mama always worked my entire life. We had a wonderful series of women that worked for our family that were cooks. One of the things that my mama would always joke that I don't sew and she doesn't cook and that's why we have a wonderful relationship. But it's funny because when we teach classes, we have a lot of the same students, so it's funny.

**00:09:09**

But when I was a child, when I was little, we lived out on Pluto, which is about seventeen miles from Yazoo City. Two really influential people in my life were a brother and sister: Mary Perry and Joseph Newton, and my son is named after Joseph, who is my grandmother's yard man. And [*Coughs*] Mary Perry was the cook when I was growing up. And then when I was

little, we had a wonderful woman named Charlotte Miles who lived in a little red house on Cherry Street in Yazoo City. Then she developed dementia, which was a really sad thing, because I was a child and didn't understand what was happening but saw that she was—it was like she was getting younger and I was getting older at this time and it was a really confusing situation.

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One time I came home from school and she couldn't figure out how to make the sink stopper work so she took the sink apart, like things like that. And she was wonderful and just a great person. And then Ernestine Williams came and worked for our family, and her son Ben Williams was the first black Colonel Rebel at Ole Miss. And she cooked for our family up through till I was in high school, I guess. But my mom is a really good cook and entertained a lot when I was a kid. It always seemed like we always had a houseful of people. And whether we were living out at Pluto or living in town, like in Jackson, my dad taught medical school for a while and we lived there when I was in high school, on the weekends we always had a houseful of people at Pluto. And I think that's why I like cooking, because everybody always hung out in the kitchen, and it was like if you can control what's happening in the kitchen you're pretty much the star of the show. **[Laughs]** So that's how I ended up in the kitchen, I guess.

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**Rien Fertel:** So did you gravitate to those three women you mentioned? Did you get to work alongside them or watch them?

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**Martha Foose:** Most of the time they would just shoo me away. But how I really got into cooking as a profession—my dad fell out of a tree in 1987.

**00:11:47**

**Rien Fertel:** What was he doing in a tree?

**00:11:49**

**Martha Foose:** He was in a deer hunting stand and it collapsed. And he was hospitalized, and I had been living out in Austin and moved back home to help take care of him. And when he recovered I moved up to Oxford, and at the time Square Books had an actual whole café, they made sandwiches and soup and all that kind of stuff, and so my gig was kind of to read whatever cookbook that they had and make something out of it to sell in the café, whether it was cookies or—we just had like a little toaster oven. It's amazing what you can get done in a toaster oven.

**00:12:26**

So I really fell in love with cookbooks, so it was kind of a long path just to end up working with cookbooks again.

**00:12:35**

**Rien Fertel:** And that's when Square Books was one store. All the food books were in one store?

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**Martha Foose:** Right.

**00:12:40**

**Rien Fertel:** So what [*Dog Barking*]—

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**Martha Foose:** Mary Hartwell was running the café upstairs.

**00:12:44**

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, and Mary Hartwell was your boss. I didn't know that she was there. That's amazing.

**00:12:47**

**Martha Foose:** She had been my aunt's roommate at Ole Miss, and Richard was my uncle's roommate.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay, so you knew the family?

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**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:12:56**

**Rien Fertel:** Do you remember the first books you went to and that you were cooking out of?

**00:13:03**

**Martha Foose:** Um—

**00:13:05**

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

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**Martha Foose:** Eighty-seven, [19]88, [19]87, somewhere along there.

**00:13:14**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**00:13:16**

**Martha Foose:** A lot of *Bayou Cuisine*, which is the most brilliant book because the index falls off the back of it. It's one of the comb bindings, which I should make all of my books comb bindings because the index falls off and then you have to buy a new one. So over the course of my life I've probably bought like, seriously, like fifteen copies of this because they—and it's not laid out in a way that you can find a recipe in it unless you have the index.

**00:13:51**

So—

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**Rien Fertel:** It's a community cookbook?

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah. So cooked a lot of things out of that. Just whatever came along. I guess then the *Silver Palate Cookbook* was big then. I remember cooking a lot of stuff out of that. And

I pulled it out the other day, which I hadn't looked at it probably in easily fifteen years and it still stands the test of time.

**00:14:24**

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, I worked at Kitchen Arts and Letters up in New York—

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**Martha Foose:** Really? Mhmm-hmm.

**00:14:27**

**Rien Fertel:** —for almost three years, and the two men who run the shop still speak in these hushed tones about a book that I did not know growing up at all, about how important those two women were, and how it changed the New York entertaining scene. And so it was happening in even down South. It was happening in Oxford, Mississippi, the same thing.

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah.

**00:14:54**

**Rien Fertel:** Did you go to Austin for school? Were you in Oxford for college?

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**Martha Foose:** I've never been to college. I didn't graduate from high school. I missed too many days.

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**Rien Fertel:** Really?

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**Martha Foose:** But remarkably I was named St. Andrew's alumnus of the year and I got a statue and everything, and I was like, "Do y'all remember, you didn't give me a diploma?" So I haven't had any schooling.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. Did you do any sort of cooking growing up before that gig in Oxford?

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**Martha Foose:** Not really. I paid a friend of my brother's once to make me a baked potato. *[Laughs]* But when I got out of high school, I moved to Austin and I started working at a Pearl's Oyster Bar. And when my dad was in the hospital after his accident I started working at Hal and Mal's and they had a great—the oyster bar was actual like a functioning oyster bar at the time and they had a great oyster shucker, Wade, Suede Wade, who taught me to shuck oysters, and that was really my first kitchenish-type job.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay, before Square Books?

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**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:16:16**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, so how long were you at Square Books in that little commissary they had?

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**Martha Foose:** I don't know, probably a year and a half or so, and then moved to Aspen, Colorado and worked at a bookstore there called Explore Books, pretty much doing the exact same job there. It was a bookstore-café. And Aspen is really expensive [*Laughs*] to live in, so I worked at Explore Books and then I worked at the Szechuan Gardens, which was obviously a Chinese restaurant, where I was the only non-family member except for one guy, Eugene Zhong. And they really took me in, and I waited tables there and we did all the table-side service, like rolling mu shu pancakes at the table and all that kind of stuff. And I would eat breakfast at the restaurant with the family every day, and really enjoyed the kitchen aspect of it and learning about that, and it was really sweet. I met some friends out there. I was living with Elaine Abadie, Ann Abadie's daughter, and Jameo, and Blaine Pitzer. And I lived in a basement apartment that had this crazy lava rock, we called it the bachelorette grotto. Met some friends there that had written a play called "Drunken Grownups," and they were from Vermont. And they were like, "Hey we're going to go do the play in Vermont. You want to come with us?" And you're eighteen and nineteen or whatever and you're like, "Sure!"

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So moved from Aspen to Vermont, and when I got to Vermont I started working in a deli called the Lazy Dog during the day, and at night I worked at a restaurant called the Chicken Bone, so I went from the Dog to the Bone every day.

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**Rien Fertel:** And were you in the kitchen?

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**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm. And worked for a guy named Sky, I think his last name was Mitchell, who was from Saratoga and had gone to CIA and was the manager at this dive bar, but ran a really efficient kitchen. And really got into cooking more there and worked also at a place called Noonie's Café that was also a bakery, and that's where I got into baking a little bit there.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay, where in Vermont was this?

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**Martha Foose:** Burlington.

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**Rien Fertel:** Burlington, okay, and did you act in the play?

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**Martha Foose:** No, uh-huh.

**00:18:58**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, you just moved with the kind of crew?

**00:19:01**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, well, I helped around but wasn't like on stage or anything like that.

**00:19:08**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, I want to back up and just ask one more question about—you worked at these two bookstores in Aspen and Oxford. Was there something special about these cafes being in bookstores? Did you gravitate towards the books? Did you—?

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah, it was more to be around—

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**Rien Fertel:** Were you at the shelves?

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**Martha Foose:** —books and I think a lot of that was feeling like if I wasn't going to be in school then I'm going to have to do something about educating myself in sort of an auto-didactical, but at the time, in retrospect, I feel like that's what I was doing, but when you're eighteen you're not really thinking that deep about things. **[Laughs]** But I think there was a big sort of chip on my shoulder that, not having graduated from high school, it wasn't like college was an option for me.

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So bookstores became a means to educating myself.

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**Rien Fertel:** And what did you love to read? Was it topics or authors?

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**Martha Foose:** I'm not really a huge fiction reader. Across the board anything, I guess I have a general curious streak about stuff.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, was there a favorite book growing up?

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**Martha Foose:** Um—

**00:20:32**

**Rien Fertel:** The Delta has—and you mentioned this—has a history of writers. Did you read them, did you read [Willie] Morris?

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**Martha Foose:** Oh, of course. When I was in fourth grade I had the best fourth grade teacher anybody in the world could want, Miss Wilburn, and every morning she'd read out of *Good Old Boy* to us, and it was really shocking. I completely remember formulating this idea that [***Train in Background***] a book could be about where you were from, because to me everything you read was always about somewhere else. And it didn't occur to me that books could be about where you were from.

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**Rien Fertel:** Right, that memoirs were possible about a place.

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah, and not even so much a memoir, just the idea that you could tell a story about where you were from.

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**Rien Fertel:** I see.

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**Martha Foose:** That really struck me.

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**Rien Fertel:** Did you ever get to meet Willie Morris and—

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**Martha Foose:** Oh, yeah.

**00:21:36**

**Rien Fertel:** —tell him that?

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**Martha Foose:** I don't think I told him that, but I mean he was just a guy that you saw. And then when I was in Oxford, he was still living on Faculty Row and spent general time hanging out at the Hoka and stuff like that.

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**Rien Fertel:** Right, so last we were in Vermont.

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**Martha Foose:** Yep.

**00:21:59**

**Rien Fertel:** Did you made your way back down to Mississippi?

**00:22:02**

**Martha Foose:** Met this guy who was dressed as a timeline for Halloween, which I thought was really funny.

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**Rien Fertel:** Can you describe that because I love costumes? [*Laughs*]

**00:22:13**

**Martha Foose:** He was a timeline. He had on like—

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**Rien Fertel:** Top to bottom?

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah. And we started going out and he worked at a futon-making business, where they hand-stitched like really authentic—an authentic futon. But there weren't futons in Mississippi. And so we moved back to Yazoo City and opened Yazoo Futon Company and sewed futons and filled them up in a truck, and he would park at the gate at Ole Miss and sold futons out of the trailer. And there weren't any other futons here, so it was kind of a fad, I guess.

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**Rien Fertel:** You filled dorm rooms.

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah, we sold them down at Southern, State, we made them for a furniture company in Jackson, and that went on for a while. And then we broke up, and I moved to Los Angeles to move in with my friend Jane Kennedy, who I had met in Vermont. When we lived in Vermont, for rent money we would do this thing called the Famous Pearl Street Gallery. We lived in this building that was really funny. It was a five-floor walkup, no landings, that had the Vermont College of Cosmetology and Dino's Pizza on the first floor, so our apartment had this like strange odor of hair permanents and burnt pepperoni.

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**Rien Fertel:** Just wafting up the floors?

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**Martha Foose:** Yeah, and so for rent money we'd have these rent parties, and we called them the Famous Pearl Street Gallery, and we'd get all of our friends that were artists, and each artist would get a room to hang up their stuff. And then we would have one thing called the Wall of Art that everybody that wanted to have a room to do an art show had to donate one piece of art for the Wall of Art. And then you paid two bucks to get into the party and then everybody's name went in a hat and at the end of the night we'd draw a name and you won everything that was on the Wall of Art.

**00:24:23**

So Jane— Jane was my roommate there and we met at a café called Leunig's, in downtown Burlington. It's a kind of Frenchie-type place. And it was crowded, and I asked if I could sit down and then we ended up being friends. We're still friends; me and Yolande [van Heerden] and Jane all lived together.

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She was living in L.A., and when Chris and I broke up I didn't really have anything to do and so I moved to L.A., and the first building that I walked into aside from Jane's apartment was La Brea Bakery.

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**Rien Fertel:** Which was a big deal at the time, right?

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**Martha Foose:** It was small—I mean well-established. Nancy had been at Stars and Michael's and stuff. But then maybe only they were making—it was still part of Campanile and La Brea Bakery, and maybe a couple hundred loaves of bread they were making a night. And my job was

I worked from 10:00 at night till noon, and baked from 10:00 until 6:00, and then we would take everything that we baked and set up the café—it's where the bar is—and so at night they would break down the bar and in the morning we'd set up the breakfast, and so I would bake until the café opened, and then worked the line till lunchtime.

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**Rien Fertel:** How many days a week were you doing those hours?

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**Martha Foose:** Continuously. Looking back it is crazy how much we worked. But it was really funny, everybody thinks of L.A. as such a car place, and I ended up buying a '62 Impala when I lived there, but in our little neighborhood I could walk to work from the bakery. And across the street from the bakery was this place, it was an Afro-Cuban jazz club that had opened up in a defunct Chinese restaurant, and they only served beer and sake and Afro-Cuban jazz.

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And it was between our apartment, and this was pre-cell phones and everything, and if I didn't come by they would call the house, "We didn't see you come. Are you okay?" So I could walk to the farmers market and library, work, and an Afro-Cuban jazz club, so I didn't really have to leave my neighborhood any.

**00:26:57**

But that was just cooking on a whole other level that I hadn't—I had barely even eaten in restaurants that were on that level, much less worked in any of them. And so I learned so much. And working for Nancy Silverton completely changed my life. She lived in an apartment above the pastry kitchen, and it was a building that Charlie Chaplin had built that was kind of the first

mini-mall in L.A. that they had converted into Campanile and the La Brea Bakery, and Nancy and her husband Mark Peel lived on the top floor with their two kids. And every morning Nancy would come down and break open one of every single thing you made and ask you—and even a simple thing like a muffin, break it open—“Why are there tunnels in this?”

**00:27:44**

I’d beat too much air into it or I’d beat it too high-speed. And so she made you have to figure out what the problem was. It was never like this do this, do that, do that. She would make you figure it out. And I worked with a wonderful pastry chef there, Sumi Chang, who has Euro Pane bakery in Pasadena now. But it was an incredible education.

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**Rien Fertel:** Did you recognize something important at the time about working for a woman that was on her way to building one of the first kind of restaurant empires?

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**Martha Foose:** I’ve been lucky in that I’ve never really worked in a male kitchen. I worked for Susan Spicer. I worked for Nancy Silverton. So much of learning in the kitchen was really fostered by women in my experience. So I think that’s a unique thing. And at the time, too, without having any education to speak of, like formal or whatever, I really saw working in restaurants as really my only option.

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**Rien Fertel:** Because—why is that?

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**Martha Foose:** I didn't know how to do anything. And after working in two bookstore kitchens I read probably hundreds of cookbooks, and so it was the quickest way that I could see to establish myself in a profession was going to be through food.

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**Rien Fertel:** So what years were you there in Los Angeles?

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**Martha Foose:** Ninety to [19]94.

**00:29:53**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, and where did you go from there?

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**Martha Foose:** Paris, to École Lenôtre in Plaisir, France. It's a baking school.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay, and how long was that program?

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**Martha Foose:** I was there for a couple months, and my grandmother became ill, and I came home to sort of be around for the end of that.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**00:30:20**

**Martha Foose:** I had a great time though. [*Laughs*]

**00:30:22**

**Rien Fertel:** Was it was enough time to learn technique and—?

**00:30:25**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, it was really funny. I was the only girl and the only American in the baking program at the time. It was a mad-cap mashup of crazy people that were in the class. In the bread classes we would go early, so by lunchtime we were pretty much finished. And so I think our teacher was a complete alcoholic. So by the time everybody else was like midway through their day we were finished, like drinking wine and eating like this great bread that we had just made. But we had this guy from Austria who could throw his voice and make it sound like there was a dog barking under the table. And it was just a really great time. And a funny thing happened there that—I've told this story a bunch—but it's really funny.

**00:31:16**

I had sat down—it's a long story—but I ended up sitting down like the first night I was there and the guy next to me is like, "You look familiar." Also when I was in L.A. I worked at a restaurant owned by Ahmad Rashad and a bunch of the Lakers—

**00:31:38**

**Rien Fertel:** The basketball announcer, okay.

**00:31:40**

**Martha Foose:** And Lou Adler, who was a record producer, and a very chichi soul food restaurant called Georgia, and Denzel Washington was one of the owners, and so I made it to Paris and sit down. And the guy was like, “You look familiar.” And was like, “Where are you from?” I’m like, “Mississippi.” And he’s like well, “Huh.” I was like, “Well, I did just leave Los Angeles.” He was like, “Did you used to work at Georgia?” And I was like, “Yeah.” He was like, “I worked at the salon upstairs.”

**00:32:06**

So it was like crazy coincidence. And we started talking, and his mother was from Georgia, and he was talking about how much he missed soul food and Southern food and stuff. And I was like, “Well I brought a bunch of grits with me.” He’s like, “You brought grits to Paris?” And I was like, “Well, I figured if I was broke and homesick that grits would solve both of those problems.” And so he’s like, “Go get your grits.” Wrote down this address and it was the year of the whole Tonya Harding Olympics was going on. And he’s like, “Look, we’re going to meet at this address to watch the English broadcast of the Olympics. Go get your grits and bring them back over here.” And I did, and we ended up being friends, and that’s how I got a place to live in Paris on the strength of grits.

**00:32:49**

**Rien Fertel:** [*Laughs*] Did you often feel homesick with all this relocating?

**00:32:54**

**Martha Foose:** Um, uh-uh.

**00:32:58**

**Rien Fertel:** No? Did you travel with local foods, like grits, often or have care packages sent?

**00:33:08**

**Martha Foose:** Care packages, yeah. My mom is a good care package [*Dog Barking*] sender.

But when we would have the parties at the Famous Pearl Street Gallery I always made gumbo, or I was always cooking Southern food wherever I was because that's just the food that came with me.

**00:33:32**

**Rien Fertel:** So then you moved back to Mississippi.

**00:33:36**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm, and opened the Bottle Tree.

**00:33:37**

**Rien Fertel:** In Oxford?

**00:33:39**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:33:39**

**Rien Fertel:** And how did that happen?

**00:33:42**

**Martha Foose:** When I came back from school in France I knew that I wanted to do a bakery and there was no quote *artisanal bread* being made anywhere, not Memphis, New Orleans. There was nothing like it. When I was at La Brea I had never even seen bread that looked like that. I didn't even know it existed.

**00:34:07**

And so I knew how to do something that no one else around here knew how to do. And Taylor Bowen Ricketts introduced me to Cynthia [Gerlach], and she had wanted to open like a coffee shop or something like that. And so we got together and decided to go in on opening this, and foolish young children that we were [*Laughs*]. But it was great. We took over an old flower shop on the Square and went down and in Yazoo City there was an old café called the Bon Ton Café that had closed in the late [19]60s, early [19]70s, that the Nicholas family had owned. And we bought everything out of the inside of the Bon Ton for \$1,000, and Michael Gault, who recently passed away, was our carpenter, and we numbered all of the pieces of the counters, the stools, everything in the Bon Ton, moved it to Oxford, and reassembled it into where the Bottle Tree is now. And since it had been a flower shop it had a big walk-in cooler from where the flowers were done, and so we rebuilt the compressor on the roof so it would be quiet, and that's how the Bottle Tree came to existence.

**00:35:37**

**Rien Fertel:** Did the town and the University embrace it immediately?

**00:35:40**

**Martha Foose:** Oh, immediately. And also the Square was still a functioning city at the time. There was a hardware store, a post office, a grocery store, a shoe shop.

**00:35:51**

**Rien Fertel:** It wasn't all bars?

**00:35:51**

**Martha Foose:** Right. I mean it was a functioning small town and the only other real, I guess, high-end dining situation—John had just taken over Sid and Harry's and turned it into City Grocery then. And Darby [Ricketts] had just opened Proud Larry's. So it was a completely different community.

**00:36:27**

**Rien Fertel:** And what year was that when—?

**00:36:28**

**Martha Foose:** Ninety-four, [19]95.

**00:36:32**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, and so you have ownership for the first time in a restaurant. How did it feel? Was it a different life?

**00:36:45**

**Martha Foose:** Fucking balls-out hard work all the time, and when the doors of a bakery open in the morning it's not like little mystery elves and fairies produced all that stuff. And so I was again working nights and for the majority, from the three-plus, four years, I was at La Brea, through the years that I owned Bottle Tree, always worked at nights.

**00:37:19**

**Rien Fertel:** And you met your husband?

**00:37:22**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm. We had when I was working at La Brea Bakery in Los Angeles, I guess it was about two years in between the time I left La Brea, went to France, came back and got the Bottle Tree opened, I worked with this really wonderful maniac named Felipe Flores. And when Felipe and I worked in Los Angeles together we had made a deal that if one of us ever got our own place that the other one would come and help them.

**00:37:54**

So—

**00:37:56**

**Rien Fertel:** He was talented? He was a talented—?

**00:37:58**

**Martha Foose:** Super-talented from West Calientes, Mexico. And so I sent Felipe a ticket that was supposed to be a two-week trip. Donald, who is now my husband, was working as a pizza maker at Proud Larry's and we hired him to come work at the Bottle Tree. And I had sent for

Felipe to come to train Donald. And Felipe ended up staying, marrying a Baptist girl, having a baby. He opened his own bakery in Oxford, briefly, called the Trigo Plant.

**00:38:31**

So Felipe came and trained Donald.

**00:38:35**

**Rien Fertel:** Just an aside question: Why do you think that happens to people in Oxford? I'm trying to figure it out having moved to there recently—

**00:38:44**

**Martha Foose:** What—

**00:38:45**

**Rien Fertel:** —for the first time? Why do people roll into the Velvet Ditch as they say, or why do people come and never leave?

**00:38:50**

**Martha Foose:** I don't know because I left.

**00:38:53**

**Rien Fertel:** [*Laughs*] Okay, we'll just leave it at that. When did you leave? How long were you there in Oxford?

**00:38:58**

**Martha Foose:** I lived there on two stints. So I lived there before I moved to Aspen and then I guess I was back maybe three or four years.

**00:39:16**

**Rien Fertel:** Before moving back to Greenwood?

**00:39:18**

**Martha Foose:** No, from there—well Donald was working as a baker, and Cynthia and I were partners in the restaurant, and business partnerships are a hard thing. But also we had gotten to a point where [*Laughs*]  
—I guess this is being recorded for all eternity—but it had gotten to the point where we had more people eating in the kitchen than we had sitting out front. And it wasn't like any sort of like a western showdown like, *this town is not big enough for the both of us*, but it was like, “Look, this isn't working; one of us has got to go.” And Cynthia I think had really invested a lot of her identity into being in that space. And I knew I could take my skill set anywhere. And my current husband, who was working for me at the bakery, I kept setting him up on dates with my cousins, because I've got like thirteen girl cousins. And they're all like, “Well, you should go out with him.” It's like, “I can't date the help.” And so sold the bakery and married my head baker. Sold the bakery, my half to Cynthia, and Donald and I—

**00:40:53**

**Rien Fertel:** Immediately after you opened! You really did do like the good owner thing and wait [*Laughs*]. Wow, that's amazing, yeah.

**00:41:01**

**Martha Foose:** And then Susan Spicer and I had met at a James Beard dinner in Memphis, and I had gone up to help Nancy at Raji's, and Susan and I got to know each other there. And she came up to Oxford because she was opening a place in New Orleans called Spice, Inc., which was in the Warehouse District, which was a super-great brilliant space but it was just kind of too early for the neighborhood, the Warehouse District was just kind of turning around.

**00:41:41**

So she hired Donald and myself, and I was the pastry chef at Bayona and he was the bread baker at Spice, Inc. and then he was also baking at the Windsor Court.

**00:41:52**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, and how long were you in New Orleans?

**00:41:55**

**Martha Foose:** About two years, I guess.

**00:42:00**

**Rien Fertel:** Did you enjoy being part of a kind of large restaurant scene that is—?

**00:42:10**

**Martha Foose:** But again the whole food scene wasn't a scene.

**00:42:16**

**Rien Fertel:** Timeline-wise?

**00:42:17**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, I mean it wasn't like—food wasn't a hobby for people like it is now. I mean it was, you're in the restaurant industry. We were newlyweds. And it wasn't a thing. It wasn't like that type of work was looked upon in any favorable light. I mean there were a few standout, star chefs, Susan of course being one of the premier ones in the city, but it wasn't a thing like it is now. You were just working—working, working, and working.

**00:43:01**

**Rien Fertel:** Right. Did you build a community with other restaurant industry folk?

**00:43:08**

**Martha Foose:** No, we were newlyweds. We were just into being newlyweds. And baker hours are not—if you're going to be a baker, New Orleans is the town to be a baker in, because there's a happy hour available at 7:00 in the morning when you get off work. I mean it's a great town if you're a baker.

**00:43:30**

**Rien Fertel:** The bars never close.

**00:43:31**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, well not only just the bars never close but it's a twenty-four-hour town. So we were just into being newlyweds. And a head-hunter—I don't know how they found us—in Minnesota found us and offered us positions to go work in Minneapolis for a company called Franklin Street Bakery. And at the time the Dayton Company had bought Marshall Field's and

they were closing the Marshall Field's bakeries in Chicago and were going to move all of their baking to Franklin Street Bakery in Minneapolis.

**00:44:25**

And we went up there to manage the bakery for Franklin Street. So we moved from New Orleans to Minneapolis.

**00:44:35**

**Rien Fertel:** And was this like industrial sized—

**00:44:38**

**Martha Foose:** Huge.

**00:44:38**

**Rien Fertel:** —baking going on?

**00:44:39**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, huge, and initially it was like we want the highest quality, and then suddenly it was like, we're going to use sixty-forty blend instead of using butter. And it was a really odd situation, that there was a very accomplished Hispanic baker that had been running the thing, and then they brought in Donald and I and it was like but this is the guy that's doing all the work. But then when they were really making some huge compromises quality-wise, it became apparent that this wasn't going to work out.

**00:45:25**

So Donald went to work for Turtle Bread, a wonderful, great bakery in Minneapolis, and I went to work for Pillsbury in their publishing department.

**00:45:36**

**Rien Fertel:** What does that mean their publishing department?

**00:45:37**

**Martha Foose:** The cookbooks at the checkout stand at the grocery store? I wrote those.

**00:45:43**

**Rien Fertel:** And was this your first writing job?

**00:45:46**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm.

**00:45:48**

**Rien Fertel:** At lunch you described yourself as a secret writer. Were you secretly doing writing before, or do you mean that this was kind of anonymous, corporate-type writing without your name on it, I'm guessing?

**00:45:59**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, on the inside you'd see your name but—

**00:46:02**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, yeah.

**00:46:03**

**Martha Foose:** —it’s really funny. I learned so much working for Andi Bidwell and Jackie Sheehan, the women that were in charge of the publications department. It was really funny because in my history like I never imagined myself going to work in an office building. And so I was very much Mary Tyler Moore like, “Yahhh.” I worked on the thirty-second floor and had my own little test kitchen, and when you do those little cookbooks they’re like a single subject, so it might be casseroles. So you have to do fifty recipes, and every recipe has to have a photograph, so I learned so much working for them because I ended up meeting a lot of food photographers at Tad Ware Photography that specialized in food. And since General Mills is there, and Pillsbury at the time was owned by Diageo, which owned all these liquor brands and they owned Progresso, Old El Paso, Haagen-Dazs, so all of these big food brands. And so I just learned so much.

**00:47:23**

I learned about food styling and food photography and recipe testing and recipe development and got to do fun projects like Haagen-Dazs—Diageo owned Haagen-Dazs and Bailey’s Irish Cream, so I would have a project for a month you have to come up with milkshakes that were going to be served at TGI Fridays or something. And so it was fun something you make is going to be all over the country.

**00:47:51**

And I did projects for their Asian divisions, like making moon cakes for Haagen-Dazs to sell in Malaysia, so it was a fascinating, great job but it was really funny because it was me and fifteen Home Ec majors from the Midwest named Barb.

**00:48:10**

**Rien Fertel:** That was my next question is like what was your staff like? *[Laughs]*

**00:48:12**

**Martha Foose:** Well, I didn't have any staff.

**00:48:15**

**Rien Fertel:** They were doing the same job?

**00:48:17**

**Martha Foose:** Right.

**00:48:18**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**00:48:18**

**Martha Foose:** Or we were doing product development for frozen vegetables or figuring out some way to make a frozen sauce puck so that when you microwaved whatever it was would turn into sauce, and so I learned a lot. And also I think Andi and Jackie, who were the editors, I was just so off-the-wall compared to a lot of Home Ec majors named Barb.

**00:48:55**

**Rien Fertel:** From the Midwest?

**00:48:56**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah. It was great. I learned so much from those. It was like going to a hardcore recipe writing boot camp. And I think that's where my fictional person I feel like I'm always writing for is Susie in Topeka, because when you do recipes like that it has to be something that every person that walks down the grocery store checkout aisle can look at that picture and understand what it is, and then you have to be able to show them and tell them how to make it. So I learned so much.

**00:49:33**

**Rien Fertel:** Were you able to inject yourself or your background and your culture of the South into these—?

**00:49:43**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:49:43**

**Rien Fertel:** Corporatized recipes?

**00:49:45**

**Martha Foose:** Oh, yeah.

**00:49:47**

**Rien Fertel:** How would you do it, or is there something that comes to mind?

**00:49:49**

**Martha Foose:** Well, also I think they didn't have references the same way. If we were working on a spring cookbook, to me that meant there's going to be a Mardi Gras component. And they're like, "Huh?" But then they were like, "We've never had anything like this." And so it was definitely a plus, because I was coming at it from a different sensibility I think than a lot of the other people that were working on the same projects would come to it.

**00:50:18**

**Rien Fertel:** Right, so how long did you do that job?

**00:50:21**

**Martha Foose:** A couple years, and then I got more into working in the food styling and photography part and pretty much worked full-time after. I did a couple years, three years maybe, at Pillsbury and then went into just working for different food photographers. And with Target's headquartered there and all those food companies, so it was freelance work, but steady.

**00:50:55**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, and then you moved back down here seventeen years ago you said?

**00:51:00**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:51:00**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, and one more question: At some point you and your husband did work together in the same kitchen. Was that easy, difficult?

**00:51:12**

**Martha Foose:** Actually, working together, we've done it a couple of times. It's easier than not working together because it's not like you come home and like, "Honey how was your day?" It's like I know how your day was because I was standing three feet away from you for the entirety of it. So it was great working together.

**00:51:33**

**Rien Fertel:** And so where did you move back when you moved back—?

**00:51:37**

**Martha Foose:** My grandmother passed away years earlier, and I inherited her house out at Pluto. And we were in Minneapolis, which is a great town, it's one of the, I think, top secret cities—it's got a vibrant great food scene. It's a huge international city. I mean it's just a real salad of humanity, but it's cold. And I remember it was Easter and it was still feet of snow on the ground and that was an instance where I had gotten homesick, but also when somebody doesn't live in a house it just goes down so quickly. And so we moved home and moved out to Pluto with no jobs on the horizon or anything like that.

**00:52:40**

**Rien Fertel:** And so what did you do? Did you rehabilitate the home? Was that step one?

**00:52:46**

**Martha Foose:** That was step one. And it wasn't—I don't know if rehabilitate is the right word, but just tried to get it all in working order again.

**00:52:58**

**Rien Fertel:** Livable, yeah.

**00:52:59**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah.

**00:53:00**

**Rien Fertel:** And did you start baking again?

**00:53:02**

**Martha Foose:** Donald and I briefly went to work for Broad Street Bakery in Jackson. And it was just clunky, not a good fit, and also we were trying to commute back and forth to the farm, which is about an hour away and that didn't really work. And it really wasn't a good fit. They were kind of baking some stuff and there wasn't really much room for personal creativity-type of situation. And then I got pregnant and I had read in the paper that Viking was opening the Alluvian Hotel and I made a tiny Viking Range out of gingerbread with like little knobs and little grill grates and like the most detailed little gingerbread oven, and brought it up here to Fred Carl and was like, "Look, I'm a French trained pastry chef living in Tchula. Perhaps you have something I can do for you." **[Laughs]**

**00:54:19**

**Rien Fertel:** And he hired the two of you?

**00:54:21**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:54:21**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**00:54:21**

**Martha Foose:** Well, first me and then we helped get the Alluvian Hotel opened and then the Viking Cooking School and then we opened the Mockingbird Bakery here in Greenwood.

**00:54:42**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**00:54:42**

**Martha Foose:** I'm going to get some tea. Can I get you anything?

**00:54:44**

**Rien Fertel:** No, I'm good.

**00:54:48**

**Martha Foose:** —computer. But we had punch cards.

**00:54:51**

**Rien Fertel:** Like an old IBM punch-card computer?

**00:54:55**

**Martha Foose:** But it was like the thing, Ole Miss had this super computer, and so my job at *Living Blues* was to compile the blues directory. So it seems so antiquated now but it was crazy, we had the punch cards and we had to punch out the little holes and scribble in the things like an SAT test. And it was all the blues clubs, booking agents, that kind of thing that I worked on for them. That's how I met Bill Ferris and Ann Abadie and Charles Wilson and that whole shebang of people was from working for *Living Blues*.

**00:55:40**

**Rien Fertel:** Huh.

**00:55:41**

**Martha Foose:** It was located in the Observatory then.

**00:55:43**

**Rien Fertel:** Right, and that was your first stay in Oxford or was that your second one?

**00:55:46**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm, the first one.

**00:55:48**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, so I want to talk about your books. Your first book came out in 2008, I believe, *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*. Was that the first book you had worked on beyond the Pillsbury books?

**00:56:02**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**00:56:03**

Well I had—

**00:56:04**

**Rien Fertel:** Had you done ghost writing or—?

**00:56:06**

**Martha Foose:** Nuh-uh.

**00:56:07**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, collaborative work? What were you going to say you had done?

**00:56:10**

**Martha Foose:** I had worked on books, I had worked on a book for Carnival Cruise Lines when I lived in Minneapolis, scaling their recipes down for home cooking and then doing the photography and all that for it. So I had worked around books but not like wrote one. **[Laughs]**

**00:56:34**

**Rien Fertel:** Right, so how did you write one? Was it the traditional proposal pitch?

**00:56:39**

**Martha Foose:** When I lived in Minneapolis I started going to the Food Writers Symposium at the Greenbrier with the idea that I wanted to write a cookbook, but didn't know how or anything. And not having gone to school it wasn't like I had written a thesis or anything before.

**00:57:09**

And I guess it was the third year, maybe, that I was at the Greenbrier, I had thought about what I want to write and I joined IACP while I was working in Minneapolis. And after I had moved home I went back to the Greenbrier, and they have a thing where—well I guess, no, it was at IACP. It was right after I had my child and I came up with the—because it was like what's going to be the angle? What's the hook for a book?

**00:58:04**

So it was going to be *A Bun in the Oven: Baking from Pregnancy through Baby's First Years*. And at IACP I went to one of the breakout workshop sessions and at the end of it they had a thing where everybody got to go up, and they had a panel, and you did your thirty second pitch. And this woman gave me her card afterwards, and it was like I'm an agent, give me a call, but I thought she was just being nice.

**00:58:31**

So about six weeks after that the phone rang and I was like, "Hello?" And, "Hello, may I speak to Martha Foose?" I'm like, "She's not in. Can I take a message?" And like, "Hi, I'm Sharon Bowers and I'm a literary agent and I had thought that she was going to get in touch with us." And I was like, "Oh, hey. I thought you were a bill collector. It's Martha." **[Laughs]**

**00:58:53**

And she sent out the proposal to a couple of editors and one of them was Rica Allannic, who was an editor at Clarkson Potter. And she said that she liked the writing, but it's not like I'm a nutritionist, or I didn't really have the credentials to be writing a book on that subject—

**00:59:18**

**Rien Fertel:** On babies—

**00:59:19**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, but she liked the writing. And at the time they didn't have—I think that maybe their only Southern person that they really had in the rotation was Sarah Foster, which is Southern but it's much more East Coast. They didn't really have a Deep South writer. So they asked if I would put a proposal together for a Southern book. And so I did and then they bought it.

**00:59:45**

**Rien Fertel:** And what did you want the book to be, look like, or feel like, when you were writing that proposal, or when writing the book?

**00:59:56**

**Martha Foose:** I really wanted it to be just what it turned out to be. It's one of the few things in my life aside from my son, and he's still not done yet, but that turned out just how I wanted it.

**01:00:07**

**Rien Fertel:** And so how do you describe the book?

**01:00:10**

**Martha Foose:** I don't know. I think it's a good look at the Delta through food, and I wanted it to be very Delta specific and not just a wide-ranging Southern book, because I mean that's like saying, "Oh, it's a book about Europe food." So I knew I wanted it to be Delta-centric because I knew that's the one thing that I had that no one else had.

**01:00:47**

**Rien Fertel:** I have the book. I remember when the book came out because—I don't know if I'm supposed to—I mean it's been ten years so I could probably say this—but I owned it because I had worked at Kitchen Arts and Letters, I was on the James Beard Book Committee that year. And so I remember receiving a copy with all the other books and everything that year. And it felt like a book not just about place but about people. The photographs felt people-heavy in ways that magazines would seize upon later. It felt like, maybe—. Am I wrong—?

**01:01:28**

**Martha Foose:** And not to toot my own horn but I guess that's why we're here. I think that the way the headnotes were, for instance that's—and giving the recipes subtitles, like the Brown Sugar Angel Food Cake, the subtitle is "The Bride Wore Ecu." And it's the story about my grandmother when she was dying of cancer and her bridge club partners coming over. So having that as a headnote to an angel food cake recipe, I don't think those connections had really been done before.

**01:02:14**

**Rien Fertel:** Right. Right, it went beyond this is my grandmother's angel food cake.

**01:02:16**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, yeah.

**01:02:18**

**Rien Fertel:** And you purposely did that? That was in the first draft?

**01:02:23**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, because to me it's not—when I put a book together I don't think I want a roast beef recipe, a fish recipe, or whatever. For instance, there's an apricot rice salad recipe. I knew in the book that I wanted to talk about Ethel Wright Mohamed, who is an embroiderist from Belzoni, that I knew I wanted to put her story in the book. So the recipe I made up was a function of being able to put that story in there.

**01:03:05**

And so all of the little grains of rice were like all of her little stitches. And she had married a Syrian man in the 1920s in rural Mississippi, and so it's flavored with cumin and coriander and sort of these Eastern spices, and then the dried fruits that are in it were sort of the same jewel tones that are in her stitchery. So the story that I wanted to include comes first and then the recipe is just a way to anchor the story in the book.

**01:03:58**

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, it's really beautiful, because cookbooks aren't made—

**01:04:02**

**Martha Foose:** Done like that.

**01:04:03**

**Rien Fertel:** —like that traditionally. Do you think that led to the success of the cookbook, or what do you think made the cookbook successful? It won awards. I believe it sold well.

**01:04:13**

**Martha Foose:** It's still selling well.

**01:04:14**

**Rien Fertel:** It still sells well. So what—

**01:04:16**

**Martha Foose:** I mean it's sold 80,000-plus copies.

**01:04:22**

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, and that's amazing for—you don't have a TV show, you don't have restaurants.

**01:04:27**

**Martha Foose:** I don't leave my yard.

**01:04:27**

**Rien Fertel:** You don't leave— *[Laughs]* So why? Why do you think this was—?

**01:04:34**

**Martha Foose:** Well, I think a couple of reasons. I think a lot of it is that Southern food is portrayed, or the South in general, like we're sitting around scratching, swatting, and fanning twelve months out of the year. And I think the personal stories are things that people can recognize in their own lives, and I think people were thankful for a book that didn't make us look stupid.

**01:05:20**

**Rien Fertel:** But why did it sell outside Mississippi, or outside the Delta?

**01:05:25**

**Martha Foose:** I don't know. It's the same year that book came out was the year that a filly won the Kentucky Derby. And I feel like both of us were like the biggest longshots.

**01:05:40**

**Rien Fertel:** Because only male horses win the Derby?

**01:05:45**

**Martha Foose:** Or even are allowed to run in it.

**01:05:47**

**Rien Fertel:** Oh really? Okay I don't even know. **[Laughs]**

**01:05:48**

**Martha Foose:** But I think things were swinging—there had already been sort of the pendulum shift to like the star chef whatever and so this was sort of the anti-version of that. And Jonathan Gold is a friend of mine in L.A.. He wrote a really loving reference to it, which got the attention, I think, of a lot of the bookie food people’s attention. But also I think sincerity wins the day. I wasn’t putting on airs trying to be anything more than what I am. So I think that had a lot to do with it.

**01:06:50**

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, it does have one of the most memorable—right now I’m going to toot your horn but it has one of the most memorable openings to a cookbook, where it’s like everyone gathers around the mailbox. And it feels real and also like just—strange.

**01:07:06**

**Martha Foose:** What weird people—

**01:07:07**

**Rien Fertel:** Well, even for someone—I’ve lived almost my whole life in the South, and it’s still like, “That happens, really, that is a thing?”

**01:07:13**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah.

**01:07:14**

**Rien Fertel:** So, I'm guessing your publisher and editor and agent wanted you to follow-up with another book immediately.

**01:07:22**

**Martha Foose:** Well—

**01:07:23**

**Rien Fertel:** How did—

**01:07:24**

**Martha Foose:** —that was one of the bad moves. After the book came out, it's amazing how it took off. It sold out of its first printing before tomato season was over and it was like, "We don't have any more books." And it was like, "Seriously?" It has a giant tomato on the cover. And I was doing events and there weren't any books.

**01:07:56**

And they were printed in China, and I was like, "They're actually on a slow boat from China right now." And so since it had sold out my agent at the time, who is no longer my agent, but I'm thankful for her for getting the book sold and hooking me up with Potter, because they're a serious bunch of folks over there, which I had no idea what I was getting into because I knew nothing about like the whole publishing situation.

**01:08:37**

That she's like, "We got to sell your next book." And it was before any of the awards or anything like that. So if I had just waited about three more months after it had won Southern bookseller awards and all that stuff—

**01:08:55**

**Rien Fertel:** James Beard Award.

**01:08:57**

**Martha Foose:** I probably would have gotten a better deal. But also I wish I hadn't had been rushed into doing the second book, because you've got forty years to accumulate stories for the first one and then you've got eight months for the second one. And honestly I had gotten just so burnt out from just being on the road, and was flying back and forth to New York all the time, and it just got to where it wasn't fun. It wasn't fun and to go to like one city to the next city and you're looking at a crowd of people and you can't remember, did I already say this to these people, and you don't want to get up and do the same spiel every time. And it just wasn't fun.

**01:09:47**

**Rien Fertel:** And you had a baby at home, too, right?

**01:09:50**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, and by that point I guess he was like five or six, but it was fun on the first round of book tour and stuff, Joe went with me. We stayed in like so many hotels that he started collecting hotel keys like other kids collect baseball cards. And one time we checked into the Barons Inn in Fair Hope, and he was used to every time we'd check into a hotel it's like the Four Seasons and we know the chef and we get there and there's like a chocolate tree with homemade marshmallows on it, or a pirate comes to deliver a chocolate treasure—he was kind of used to rolling with the chef crowd.

**01:10:32**

So we pull into the motel, and he's like, "Where's the hall?" And I was like, "What?" Because it was a motel, it didn't have a hall. And I was like, "Well, honey, this is a motel. You motor into it." So we get into the room, and he's not impressed. And he's like, "Let's call room service." And I was like, "Well, honey, this is a motel. They don't have room service." He's like, "Mama, I like a hotel more than a motel." It was great for him. We got to travel and so many great things came out of it that he got to experience, that was great. But the second time around it just wasn't fun.

**01:11:16**

**Rien Fertel:** The second book?

**01:11:17**

**Martha Foose:** It wasn't fun to be on the road so much. It wasn't fun to—just pimping yourself is—and although we are sitting here talking about myself—it's a drag to talk about yourself all the time. It wasn't fun. I much more enjoy like learning about stuff than just talking about yourself, so I kind of burned out on it.

**01:11:49**

**Rien Fertel:** And just one question about the second book, how would you describe it?

**01:11:56**

**Martha Foose:** On the first book I wanted to really kind of explore those iconic Southern ingredients and the stories around them. And for the second one I wanted to kind of do more modern takes on traditional Southern food. So that was the idea behind the second one.

**01:12:23**

**Rien Fertel:** And so I know you got the opportunity to collaborate with other cookbook authors, both with your name on the cover and, I imagine, doing some ghostwriting. What appeals to you about that process? Was it maybe because you could stay at home and do all the cooking and the writing and not go on the road?

**01:12:49**

**Martha Foose:** That and I'm curious about other people. And I really like collaborating. I think I figured that out after the second book. It's a lot to sit in a room by yourself or be in a kitchen by yourself. I just really like—I like collaboration. I like to have somebody to share it with: the joy and the pain of the process.

**01:13:26**

**Rien Fertel:** Well, let me ask one question about collaborating, especially on the first two books. Did Chris shoot both your books, the first one and the—?

**01:13:31**

**Martha Foose:** Ben Fink did the photography for the first one and, it's funny, when you work in like a photo studio for cookbooks and stuff there's—or if it's for a corporate kind or something—you've got like five people standing around looking at a plate and like, "Oh, I think

the tomatoes should go on the left. Oh, I think the tomatoes should go on the right.” But when we shot *Screen Doors* it was just me and Ben. It wasn’t like I even had people prepping food and all the dishes are my dishes. It wasn’t like some props or whatever. So and when I worked with Chris Granger, who I adore and think the world of and admire his work tremendously, my friends Minter and Elizabeth came, and so we had somebody that was at least prepping the food and stuff so that we could be shooting it.

**01:14:35**

**Rien Fertel:** Can you just over two minutes or something can you give me like a rundown of what a shoot—?

**01:14:43**

**Martha Foose:** It’s so crazy.

**01:14:44**

**Rien Fertel:** —feels or looks like over—just the short timeline of, say, just one recipe or one page?

**01:14:50**

**Martha Foose:** It’s crazy.

**01:14:53**

**Rien Fertel:** Why is it crazy? [*Laughs*]

**01:14:55**

**Martha Foose:** Well first the photographers are incredibly expensive. You're looking at probably a minimum of \$25,000, that's before you buy any food or pay anybody to help you. I mean that's just like the flat rate that's coming out. So it's incredibly expensive and you've got to make the most of the time while you have the photographer there. And I think the majority of people, particularly these days, shoot all natural light so you're fighting the elements against you, the clock is against you. In my case, well, we live in a really rural community, so sometimes it's a challenge just to be able to get the ingredients that you need and make sure—you're racing the clock on the weather, on the time of the photographer. How cute is this lettuce going to look tomorrow? We've got to shoot this, this, and this, because it's dying on the vine.

**01:15:59**

So there's that. And then also if you want—how closely are you going to try to relate and set a mood and the picture that's going to really pair up with the story, or are you just going to have a tight shot of a plate of food? So there's a lot of considerations that you have to—how narrative you want to be with the photographs? On top of is there a step in the recipe that you think that the home cook is going to need a visual of, like if it's how you're going to crimp the edge of the pie crust or something like that? Is there a step in the recipe that you need to have a visual for? So there's a lot of things to consider. It's not just like, "Oh, this will be cute." And I see a lot of books lately that everything looks like an Anthropology ad. You can look at it and you have no idea where—it could be in New Hampshire, it could be in Arizona—

**01:17:09**

**Rien Fertel:** Like beautiful people at a picnic table-kind of thing?

**01:17:12**

**Martha Foose:** You can't tell—. Yeah, or here's a piece of slate and a precious parsley leaf or something like that. That's not giving me any—it's not drawing me in and encouraging me to make the recipe. And I think that's what photography should do in a book is to encourage you.

**01:17:34**

**Rien Fertel:** I wanted to ask about one more collaboration, and that's with Asha Gomez. Y'all had a book come out last year, I think, *My Two Souths*, which is a Southern book but also a southern Indian book. Can you talk about that experience?

**01:17:53**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, and we're embarking on a new project.

**01:17:55**

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, good.

**01:17:56**

**Martha Foose:** We just signed another collaboration agreement for a book called *Colorful*. My agent Janis Donnaud hooked Asha and I up, and I had never heard of her but then again I don't leave my yard. [*Laughs*] I'm really not like on the scene at all.

**01:18:25**

And I drove over to Atlanta, and at the time she had Cardamom Hill restaurant, and I sat down and ate one of every single thing on the menu. And it was like, this woman can cook her brains out.

**01:18:42**

And I really felt the subject was intriguing and how this mashup of Southern and Southern would work. And she was going through a lot at the time: closing her restaurant, opening her new space. So I don't think anybody really knows what they're getting into when they embark on a project like that. And a lot of my role was just getting her to open up and really explore why she was cooking, not what she was cooking.

**01:19:30**

**Rien Fertel:** So would you sit down with her? Did you talk over the phone?

**01:19:35**

**Martha Foose:** We talked on the phone, we Skyped, I drove over to Atlanta a couple of times, once in the huge snowstorm, that was no fun. And I did a book with Kimberly Schlapman, who is the singer from the band *Little Big Town*, a book called *Oh Gussie!* with her. And so it's trying to capture the way—aside from how you're going to structure the book, with Kimberly I knew the things that were important to her were family, friends, music, home, and then she spends 280 days on the road, away, so that's how I structured her book was family, friends, music, home, and away.

**01:20:27**

And then Asha was so into her cooking and being a mom that for her book it became apparent that it should be structured over the course of her day, getting up, getting her son ready for school, going to the market, preparing the food for the restaurant. So I set it up so it ran the course of her day. So what I try to do is find an authentic reason, so it's not meat, fish, poultry, or breakfast, lunch, and dinner, that it's more an intimate look at when they're cooking, what they're cooking, or why they're cooking.

**01:21:04**

And you cannot find two more different voices in the world than a country music superstar and an Indian chef in Atlanta. So it's a lot of talking to somebody and getting the cadence of how they speak, what are phrases they use a lot. Like Kimberly does not cuss at all. And so she's like a 1940s movie person, because she's like, "Stars and garters" or "Oh Gussie."

**01:21:36**

**Rien Fertel:** She's very glamorous looking. I had to go look her up. I didn't know—. [*Laughs*]

**01:21:38**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, and so she is very much, "Oh, stars and garters," and so when—instead of cussing she always says, "Oh Gussie," like when she can't—so that's why that became the name of her book.

**01:21:55**

And Asha, though, is very measured in the way that she speaks and she's a very literal person. So it's just trying to capture that person's voice.

**01:22:07**

**Rien Fertel:** Do you record people when you—?

**01:22:09**

**Martha Foose:** Nuh-uh.

**01:22:10**

**Rien Fertel:** You just listen?

**01:22:10**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**01:22:11**

**Rien Fertel:** Do you take notes?

**01:22:12**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**01:22:13**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**01:22:14**

**Martha Foose:** But I don't record people.

**01:22:15**

**Rien Fertel:** You don't record?

**01:22:15**

**Martha Foose:** Nuh-uh.

**01:22:16**

**Rien Fertel:** Before we wrap up, I just want to ask about the—you're working or finishing the third book. Can you say something about it, kind of the collaborative aspect and what it's about?

**01:22:31**

**Martha Foose:** Yes, super tickled about it.

**01:22:34**

**Rien Fertel:** All that you can share and want to share.

**01:22:36**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, I'm working on a book with Amy Cameron Evans, who we adore, who, aside from being a greater writer, is just a great artist, and I've always been a fan of her artwork. I made her wedding cake, which was the first cake I baked at the Mockingbird Bakery here. And I was like, "Amy, we should do a cookbook together." "No, no, no." And then one day out of the blue she called and she's like, "We should do that." And I was like, "Okay, let's do it."

**01:23:17**

So it's coming out with Chronicle Books in April of 2019. It's sixty recipes with fictitious, non-food-related headnotes and Amy's artwork.

**01:23:37**

**Rien Fertel:** And the headnotes are they written from a first-person perspective? Or about individual characters?

**01:23:47**

**Martha Foose:** For instance, Amy's paintings have names, like one of them is "Marge Took Her Usual Measurements," and the painting—that's that title—is a can of Texus canned

grapefruit juice and a ruler. So the way the headnotes run is since her paintings are a sentence as the title, the headnote starts off “Marge Took Her Usual Measurements,” and then it goes on, “And those measurements were two fingers of flower scented vodka.” And so that’s how they run, like that. So it’s called *A Good Meal is Hard to Find: Storied Recipes from the Deep South*.

**01:24:37**

**Rien Fertel:** Are you anxious about writing fiction?

**01:24:43**

**Martha Foose:** Nuh-uh.

**01:24:43**

**Rien Fertel:** No? Do you think of it as fiction?

**01:24:45**

**Martha Foose:** Nuh-uh.

**01:24:45**

**Rien Fertel:** What do you—?

**01:24:46**

**Martha Foose:** Story-telling doesn’t have to be fact or fiction.

**01:24:52**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, that they’re somehow related to the world, your world.

**01:24:56**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah.

**01:24:56**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**01:24:57**

**Martha Foose:** And it's really funny. With me doing the recipes and Amy doing the paintings, we joke and we call it—it's like an Oreo cookie, we both work on the cookie parts and then meet in the middle for the creamy center, that's the headnotes. But in inventing all of these people, sixty imaginary people, Amy and I laugh, we have this whole community of non-existent people that we've become friends with now. Because we'll be like, "Well, I don't think Freda would really do this." Or, "Velma—." One of them that didn't make the book that we made up was Thomasina, and she's from Vicksburg, she likes buttermilk milkshakes. These whole imagined histories of these made-up people.

**01:25:52**

**Rien Fertel:** Are they all women?

**01:25:53**

**Martha Foose:** No. I'd say maybe eighty percent.

**01:25:59**

**Rien Fertel:** And is it all set in Mississippi or in the Delta?

**01:26:03**

**Martha Foose:** Nuh-uh.

**01:26:04**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**01:26:05**

**Martha Foose:** It's not really listed where they're from.

**01:26:08**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**01:26:09**

**Martha Foose:** To me they seem overtly Southern, but if I were from Missouri I might think they sound like the ladies in Missouri down the street.

**01:26:19**

**Rien Fertel:** And Amy is from Texas.

**01:26:22**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah. But she has a real strong and deep connection. We met when she was working on oral history projects here in conjunction with Viking Range, was sponsoring a lot of

it. And so we met here in the Delta and she got married here in Greenwood, and so she has a strong Delta connection, roots.

**01:26:48**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay. Really just have one more topic I want to cover and it's about characters, and we talked about this briefly over lunch, but you do appear in a memoir that was incredibly popular and it's been the bestseller in the State of Mississippi for like three years, I believe. It's called *Dispatched from Pluto* by Robert Grant?

**01:27:13**

**Martha Foose:** Richard.

**01:27:13**

**Rien Fertel:** Richard Grant, Richard Grant, I'm sorry. And it's non-fiction, it's a memoir, but you are a character in it. Do you get mistaken for a character because it is—?

**01:27:30**

**Martha Foose:** That was a problem before the book came out, so—. [*Laughs*]

**01:27:35**

**Rien Fertel:** Of course he's only telling one part of who you are and who he knows. But what was your reaction when the book came out and became so popular?

**01:27:49**

**Martha Foose:** Well, the book is very true to how that whole situation unfolded. Richard came down to visit, we were sitting out in the yard at the farm, and he had just finished a book about an incredibly dangerous—well, his two previous books were he had himself in very dangerous positions. One of them was walking through the Sierra Madres with drug runners and this next one was about charting the last uncharted river in the world, called the Malagarasi in Africa, which was also a very dangerous situation with poachers and animals trying to kill him and disease.

**01:28:42**

And I was like, “You should just write a book about this. It’ll be fun, come on.” And he did. But as the book was going on and we were like just hanging around I didn’t know at the time that I was even in the book. I mean I knew things were going to be in the book about like spending Valentine’s Day at Parchman [Prison], but I didn’t know I was going to be in the book. I thought it was just going to be about him and his experiences.

**01:29:16**

So when he sent it to me to read it before he turned it in I was kind of like, “What?” But it’s just weird, it’s a weird thing to have people look at your life through someone else’s eyes to think, but it’s been a fun experience.

**01:29:42**

**Rien Fertel:** And has your family embraced it?

**01:29:45**

**Martha Foose:** Hmm—

**01:29:45**

**Rien Fertel:** Because your whole family is kind of—

**01:29:48**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, uh—

**01:29:50**

**Rien Fertel:** And extended family.

**01:29:52**

**Martha Foose:** All but a couple have been fine with it. Yeah—

**01:30:04**

**Rien Fertel:** Have people discovered you from that book?

**01:30:09**

**Martha Foose:** Mm-hmm.

**01:30:10**

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

**01:30:12**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, I definitely saw like an uptick in things, but also it's weird to be in some random situation, it's just like, "Oh I know you." And it's like, "No, you don't." [*Laughs*] But it

hadn't had any negative things. I don't think I'll be asked to be the President of the PTA or anything after it, but—.

**01:30:45**

**Rien Fertel:** All right, just one last question: When you think about like [*Train in Background*] the future, I guess, and your cookbook career, what comes to mind? Is there like a number of cookbooks you want to write? Is there a cookbook you want to write in the future? Is there like an ideal something?

**01:31:06**

**Martha Foose:** Well, after I get through with this one I've been working on a novel called *Piss Elegant*, so I think that will probably be the next thing that I go onto after I get through. This book will come out in spring [20]19, so that means that you've pretty much got a year of dealing with it once it comes out.

**01:31:26**

Like the fun part is making the book, but then you've made your bed and now you've got to sell it. So that will go on for pretty much most of next year and then hopefully in 2020 the novel will come out.

**01:31:42**

**Rien Fertel:** And how do you find writing a novel or fiction?

**01:31:48**

**Martha Foose:** It's fun. I mean, again, it's getting to make up stories.

**01:31:55**

**Rien Fertel:** Have you taken a course or have you read books or just you are doing it yourself and writing a novel?

**01:32:01**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah. It's about a plumbing company in the Mississippi Delta.

**01:32:14**

**Rien Fertel:** That sounds great.

**01:32:15**

**Martha Foose:** Yeah, *Piss Elegant*.

**01:32:17**

**Rien Fertel:** All right, well, I want to thank you for sitting down to talk for all this time.

**01:32:22**

**Martha Foose:** [*Laughs*] I hope you got whatever it is you need.

**01:32:25**

**Rien Fertel:** Thank you. No, it's great, thank you so much.

**01:32:29**

**Martha Foose:** It's a sordid tale.

**01:32:30**

**[End Martha Foose Interview]**