Debbie Moose

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Annemarie N.: Good afternoon. This is Annemarie Nichols recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, April 11, 2018, and I am at the home of . . . I'm at the home of Debbie Moose. [Laughter] Sorry, it's been a long day. [Laughter] And we are in Raleigh, North Carolina. Could you start off, Ms. Moose, could you introduce yourself for the recorder?

[00:00:26]

Debbie M.: Okay. Well, I am Debbie Moose. I am a native North Carolinian, which is unusual in Raleigh. I grew up in Winston-Salem, and I've lived here in Raleigh for probably about thirty years or so. I am a freelance food writer and cookbook author. My seventh cookbook just came out this week. Before that, I was a general newspaper journalist, and that's about it, I guess.

[00:01:02]

Annemarie N.: That's good. Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to grow up in Winston-Salem?

[00:01:06.07]

Debbie M.: Well, my family in particular, my mother was not a great cook. Cooking was not her thing. You see these, I see these essays by people about oh, how their mothers influenced them. Well, my mother maybe didn't in an opposite way. She could feed us without us dying, but that was pretty much it. I didn't know fish came in other than a stick form until I got to college. [Laughter] at UNC. But one thing we did have, my father grew up on a

farm, and so we always had a big backyard garden, and I think, as far as food goes, that's what I took away from growing up, as far as food goes. Because we always had all these fresh vegetables. Like I'd go out and pick something at four o'clock and we'd eat it at six. Or my father and I would walk through the garden, and he'd pull out a green onion or a carrot and brush it off on his pants, and then we'd eat it, just standing there. So just how good really fresh food is I think is what I took out of that.

[00:02:28]

Annemarie N.: That's really great. What were your parents' names?

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Debbie M.: My mother was Juanita Shaw Moose, and my father was Everett P. Moose, and they both grew up in Iredell County, here in North Carolina.

[00:02:42]

Annemarie N.: Cool, awesome. What brought them to Winston-Salem?

[00:02:47.21]

Debbie M.: Well, they got married and I think my father's job was there. This would have been in [19]56, 1956. See, I guess it was that he got a job.

[00:03:01]

Annemarie N.: Okay. You mentioned in some of your writing, especially about your deviled eggs, your grandmother, what your mother didn't teach you about those things, she kind of taught you. Can you talk about your grandmothers' influence on you?

[00:03:13]

Debbie M.: Yes. My grandmother was the one who really liked to cook. She took a lot of pride in it. She didn't really want you to know what she was doing. [Laughter] So she never really wanted to write things down. Unfortunately, I don't have any of her recipes, because she didn't really want to give them. I was at an age when she died that I didn't really care that much about it at that time. But she took a lot of care with things, her coconut cakes and her lemon meringue pies and the deviled eggs were always really tangy, very smooth and creamy and tangy. When I was writing my deviled eggs book, my cousin and I got in a big discussion about what was in our mawmaw's deviled eggs, because we were trying to remember, since we didn't have a recipe. [Laughter]

[00:04:09]

Annemarie N.: That's great. What was your grandmother's name?

[00:04:12]

Debbie M.: Ruth Link Shaw, in Iredell County.

[00:04:19]

Annemarie N.: Cool. Can you talk a little bit about, we can move on to your journalism career? Or before, your education, what got you interested in studying journalism?

[00:04:29]

Debbie M.: Well, I wasn't good at math or science, and I didn't think any teams were going to recruit me for a sport, and writing was pretty much all I could do competently. [Laughter] But I started writing when I was probably in third grade, little stories and things like that, fairy tales. I just always loved to write. Then, as time went on, I found out—we'd always read newspapers in my house. My father was not a big reader, but that was back when you had two daily papers. He would read every word of both papers all the way through. We would sit down and talk about what was in the paper. So, I thought, well, this looks pretty good. You can make a living writing, and you can ask all the nosy questions you want, and people will answer them. So, that was kind of what got me interested.

[00:05:29]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Can you talk a little bit about why you decided to go to UNC and major in journalism there?

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Debbie M.: Well, it was the only journalism school in the state. It was a state school. My parents were not going to be able to afford anything that was very expensive. It was a state school. My father loved the Tar Heels, so he was thrilled that I was going there. It was just an obvious choice. I graduated high school in [19]75, and back then, it wasn't like it

is now where you apply to a whole bunch of different schools and hope you'll get one. You didn't do that so much back then. So, I only applied to UNC, and I got in.

[00:06:26]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Can you talk a little bit about some of the experiences you had there while you were in school? As far as journalism goes? Maybe some internships or some professors or mentors you had that impacted you.

[00:06:41]

Debbie M.: Wow. Well, just the whole experience of being there and being there and learning about all these different things and working on the *Daily Tar Heel*. The *Tar Heel* just had a reunion get-together a couple of months ago, and that was really amazing. It was right after Watergate, so we were all going to be the next Woodward and Bernstein. We were all going to go work at the Washington Post, as unlikely as that was, that was what we all thought. [Laughter] So, there was just this whole feeling that journalism really made a difference, and that permeated the place. It was just really exciting to be there.

[00:07:26]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Can you talk a little bit about some of your colleagues and some of your fellow students, what did they go on and do? What was that reunion like?

[00:07:35]

Debbie M.: People were in all kinds of different places at this point. Some had gone on to work for large newspapers. Some had gone on to do other things. The editor of the DTH when I was there, he ended up becoming the, getting a law degree and becoming the dean of the law school.

[00:08:03]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:08:06.]

Debbie M.: So, a lot of people doing a lot of different things, but they still valued that time, you know, that they had there. That was important.

[00:08:15]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about some of the things you did while you worked for the *Daily Tar Heel*?

[00:08:21.17]

Debbie M.: I don't remember a lot of specifics, to tell you the truth. I wrote whatever they assigned, feature stories, news stories, a lot of late nights and craziness, editing and hanging around the office. This was before cell phones and before the internet, and I remember the editor got really tired of people calling up, asking for sports scores, so he started making them up. You know, the phone would ring. Oh, Duke game? 7 to 75. [Laughter] He got so tired of people calling. I mean, there was no . . . our main

connection with food was calling out for pizza. I mean, this was not a very food aware situation. [Laughter]

[00:09:15.03]

Annemarie N.: That's great. So, how did you get interested in writing about food?

[00:09:21.19]

Debbie M.: Well, after I graduated UNC, I went to a small paper called the *Salisbury Post*, near Charlotte. Generally, you're doing everything. Then I got married and my husband is in computers, I.T. So we wanted to move here because he'd have more opportunities with Research Triangle Park. So, I got a job on the copy desk at the *Raleigh Times* when it existed. Then it folded and went into the *News & Observer*. I was primarily writing features, I had gone in that direction rather than so much hard news, because I kind of got more interested in what people were thinking and doing rather than so much hard news kind of things. With features, you can explore that—you know, social trends and what people are thinking and what they're doing and everything. So I was going along, doing that, and the food editor they had at the time left abruptly. He was encouraged to leave. He'd had a problem with deadlines. He didn't know what they meant. So, it'd been an ongoing issue, and finally . . . so, the features editor came to me and asked me if I wanted to take over doing the food section. I said, "Well, you know I don't know a thing about food." She said, "Well, yeah, I know that." But she knew I had editing experience. She knew I had writing experience as well, and she knew I knew what a deadline was. So she said, "Look at this the way you would look at any beat you would get assigned, like city

hall or county government. Who are the important people? Who are the movers and shakers? What do the readers want to know about it? What are the important issues and trends? What kind of things are coming? What is happening now? And approach it like that." She was willing to make changes, try new things. She said, "Try it for three or four months. If you really don't like it, you can go back to what you were doing." I didn't see how I could lose, so I did that. The more I got into it, the more I realized, you can touch on anything when you write about food. Especially nowadays. When I became a food writer, it was probably [19]80, late [19]80s, probably. Because I left the *N&O* in [19]98. So, things were starting to change. It wasn't just fifty ways to cook a chicken breast anymore. People were looking at other issues surrounding food. So, vegetarianism was just starting to come on the radar. It was really the very beginning of eat local and interest in local produce. So, all of that was just kind of coming up, and all those issues, it sort of became okay to explore those things in a food section, instead of just recipes and things like that. So, that's what's really exciting. You could write about anything when you write about food. It can be social issue, love, sex, culture, politics. It can really be anything, particularly now. Those issues need to be part of the discussion. So, why wouldn't you want to do that? The whole plate is open to you, to make a really bad pun. I didn't have any food training. People think there was some kind of Pillsbury Bake-Off to become a food editor, no. Most of the people I know kind of fell into it in a similar way. I'll be interested to see what you find out. I didn't have any food training. I didn't go to culinary school. As I said, my mother was not exactly a great trainer. So, I started taking some cooking classes so I could get some skills and understand more about what I was reading and what I was hearing about. Because as a journalist, your job is to translate somebody

else's skill and expertise into a way that a reader can understand it. So I didn't feel it was necessary that I be able to cook as well as Julia Child, as much as I be able to tell other people how she does what she does. Does that make sense?

[00:14:48]

Annemarie N.: That makes perfect sense.

[00:14:49]

Debbie M.: So, yeah, just kind of went from there. I found a vegetarian columnist. I decided I wanted one in the section. It was not easy at that particular time to find a vegetarian, also somebody who could write halfway decently, but I found one. I tried really hard to find some diverse voices back then, some African American writers. It was really hard to find.

[00:15:25.00]

Annemarie N.: Can you talk a little bit about what the column looked like? Like the column you inherited, what did that look like? You were talking about the changes.

[00:15:33.23]

Debbie M.: The section?

[00:15:33.23]

Annemarie N.: Yeah. I'm sorry, that's my fault.

[00:15:36]

Debbie M.: That's okay. Well, prior to, the editor who didn't understand deadlines. It had been pretty typical of a lot of newspapers. It was a woman who had edited it, had been food editor for a million years. She was also the restaurant reviewer. She did both. So, it was something, long, long time it had been the same way; usually a recipe-driven main story, lot of recipes. Very recipe-driven. Like Easter time, there'd be a deviled egg story. Memorial Day, there'd be a grilled hamburger story. So I wanted to kind of try to move it out of that a little bit. It was still very recipe-driven because that's what readers wanted then. Excuse me. They wanted a lot of recipes, and it was the only resource for recipes. There was no internet, and the section was larger than sections are now. One thing we started doing was running a list every spring, about this time, a place you could go pick your own strawberries. You know? People loved that. They'd clip it out and save it.

[00:17:09.22]

Annemarie N.: That's great. What were some other things that you did? You mentioned the vegetarian column and trying to add more diverse voices with your writing. Can you go into a little more description with that, and talk about the changes and how you tried to transform the food section?

[00:17:27]

Debbie M.: Well, I tried to write some stories that weren't completely recipe-driven. The fifty ways to cook a chicken breast. To try to look at some other issues or profiles of important people in the food world. Like I remember, one of the first profiles I did was Ben Barker

at Magnolia Grill in Durham. That was back when he was having farmers grow vegetables for his restaurant, and that was just unheard of. Like, is he crazy? What's he doing? Now, that's an accepted thing, that if you're a good restaurant, that's what you do. So, trying to branch that out a little bit. Some . . . I did not review restaurants. They took that piece away. They separated it, which is the way it should be, because I still just—there's a lot of discussion in the food world about this. I still believe that restaurant reviewers should be anonymous, and if you also are responsible for producing the section, it's really difficult to keep that anonymity. So, I think those should be separate. I didn't want to be the restaurant reviewer. I didn't have that expertise. So, I tried to bring some humor to the section. I remember it was summer and we decided we wanted to do an okra story. So I was like, okay, what can we do with this instead of a bunch of what to do with okra? How to get rid of the slime? You know, all the usual stuff. So, I'd been watching some old movie channel, so we decided to write it and lay it out and design it like a horror movie. You know, the attack of the pod creatures. So, we had this big illustration of, like, an okra attacking, okra pod attacking something. That was just fun. Try to have some fun with it. I had a column, there was a column that ran down the side, and it was supposed to be for, like, events coming up, and that's pretty dry, so I started trying to spice that up a little bit with some humor. So, yeah, it was fun. I did not . . . I did not have a staff. Only larger newspapers had any kind of a food writing staff, like *San Francisco Chronicle* would, *Washington Post* would. Most papers the *News & Observer's* size would not have had—one person, it would be a one-person operation. So, that was good and bad. I could kind of . . . as long as it got out on time, I could kind of do what I wanted. But then, it was a lot of work for one person.

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Annemarie N.: Can you talk about some of those challenges?

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Debbie M.: Oh, and at one time, I was also doing the home section at the same time.

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Annemarie N.: Oh, wow. [Laughter]

[00:20:45]

Debbie M.: For a while. But it was—sorry, go ahead.

[00:20:47]

Annemarie N.: No, no. That's fine. Do you want to talk about that?

[00:20:48.29]

Debbie M.: No, I'd rather not. [Laughter] No, I mean, if you want to I will. That was really bad. I knew even less about home furnishings than I did about food. [Laughter]

[00:21:00]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about the responsibilities that you had as the food editor? And what was the learning curve, too?

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Debbie M.: Well, since I was looking at this initially from a journalists' point of view, if there was a learning curve, I wasn't aware of it, because I was looking at it the way—if you were doing a story about anything, you go in and you learn that and then you go on to the next thing. So, I guess I wasn't aware of a huge learning curve. It was more of an organizational, being responsible for a whole section; getting my time organized. Of course, as I got more into writing about food and I wanted to learn more about technique, maybe that's what you mean, but learning about how things were done. I approached it from a journalist's point of view, not necessarily like how someone who's gone to culinary school would. So, I didn't . . . if there was a learning curve, I wasn't aware of it. What was the, I'm sorry, what was the other part?

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Annemarie N.: What were some of the other responsibilities you had as the food editor?

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Debbie M.: Well, that varied depending on which . . . I've had different editors over the years. Some had different requirements like how many lead section front stories had to be locally produced, like written by me. How many of those I had to produce, write. How many of those could be from a wire service. So, because producing a major story every week, along with editing the copy, pulling copy off of wire to fill it up, making sure that photos are shot, illustrations are done . . . if there are any outside columnists, making sure

that their material got to me, because this was before you could just email stuff. Getting those things typed. Answering the phone with reader questions. I felt like readers really had a personal connection to the food section, and I've heard other food editors say that, that they just feel like they can call up and talk to you and ask you all kinds of nutty questions. So, there were a lot of phone calls. That, and every week, and that was every week. The main thing was, how many stories I had to—how many main lead stories I would be responsible for. Because if you're doing one every week along with everything else, you can't always get into as much depth as you'd like to. So, often I'd discuss with the editors, you know, here's this topic that's more in-depth. I'd really like to dig into this. Can we kind of do a wire next week? And give me some time. There was also the idea back then that a food story would never run on the front page of the paper. It would never be on 1A, because it was a food story. That has completely changed, fortunately. But I was told that at one time, oh, that's a really good story. Yeah, but that's not ever going to go on 1A.

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Annemarie N.: As a journalist, how'd that make you feel? That your work, because it was a certain category, it was about food, that people didn't see it as a significant piece?

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Debbie M.: I thought it was short-sighted and silly, and I said so on a number of occasions. [Laughter] You know, it was just this mindset. Oh, well, that's just a food story. Well, what won the Pulitzer Prize last year was just a food story about slave labor and shrimp

farming in Indonesia. So . . . yeah. It was . . . but it was different time period, and people didn't realize how significant some of these issues were. Then still, you know, to give people something that made their lives more useful was interesting, it didn't have to all be this huge thing—like the pick your own list I mentioned. It was always a lot of fun to do that, because people loved that. They'd take their kids out to the strawberry patch, and they'd call up, oh, it's so exciting to see it. I started adding a list of farmer's markets when we started getting a number of farmer's markets, and trying to encourage people to go out to those. There was also value, I mean, even when I write cookbooks now. I still find great pleasure in knowing if someone tells me, oh, I got this recipe out of your cookbook and I make it for my family and they really love it and I cook it all the time. I still get pleasure out of that, knowing I've done something to make somebody's life a little bit better.

[00:26:25]

Annemarie N.: That's great. You're mentioning your audience, and you mentioned a little earlier about that personal connection that you as a journalist kind of have with these folks. How did the audience kind of impact what you decided to write?

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Debbie M.: Well, in a really useful way, because you want to know what people are concerned about. So, you know, if somebody called up with a concern about, oh, we used to get phone calls about bagels. This was like the late [19]80s, early [19]90s, and people were moving here from all over the country. I'd get so many phone calls, people wanting these

darn bagels. Like, you don't have decent bagels here. You don't have decent bagels here. And I'd get so mad, like, eat a biscuit. Eat a biscuit already. So, we ended up doing some kind of story about biscuits and bagels, because people kept calling up about bagels. So, sometimes, readers send you a message. Sometimes, they make you laugh. I do miss some of that, being a freelancer.

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Annemarie N.: I bet. I think another thing—this is kind of like, connected—I think reading some of the articles and essays that you've written, they're really fun because they're really witty, and you do use food as a lens to look at social issues or cultural issues. How did you kind of . . . first part of this question, because it's two things—

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Debbie M.: [Laughter] I'll try to keep up.

[00:28:11]

Annemarie N.: Okay. How did you develop that writing style? Because it's really distinctive.

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Debbie M.: [Laughter] Well, I've been crazy all my life. I plan to continue being crazy. It's just always kind of how I've looked at things, and just over the years, I've let it come out more. [Laughter] There's a lot of silliness in food, too. There's a lot of just ridiculous things, and also just . . . if you, oh, who said this? I think Erma Bombeck said, “When

humor goes, there goes civilization." [Laughter] You know, food's a place where you can have some of that and entertain people while you're providing them some knowledge.

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Annemarie N.: That's really great. How did people respond to that, and how did you use that to challenge your audience?

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Debbie M.: The humor?

[00:29:15]

Annemarie N.: Yeah, or like your writing style. So like you will bring kind of a witty article about a certain topic, like how did you kind of use that to challenge your readers and to make them maybe think about things in a different light?

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Debbie M.: Well, pointing out silliness. Like a column I wrote recently about this guy who's famous on the internet for salting his steak. Come on. A less than one minute video, this guy salting steak, now he's famous all over the world for salting his steak, and he's all over restaurants. He's got restaurants. That's just ridiculous to me. If you satirize that a little bit, maybe people will realize this is silly and go do something useful. Go bake your loved one a cake instead of watching salt videos on the internet. [Laughter] I guess that's kind of how I look at it.

[00:30:24]

Annemarie N.: That's great. You mention how you were kind of a one-woman team. What kind of relationships—that can be kind of lonely. What kind of relationships did you develop with other food editors or food writers, either within the South or within the United States as a whole? How did those help you?

[00:30:53]

Debbie M.: Well, before I did that, the first thing I did was I worked on buttering up people in my own office. So, maybe I could get a few things done that I might not be able to get done on my own. Photographers, if you treat them really nice; page designers, if you treat them really nice. I remember one year, I hadn't done the section very long, and there used to—I think it still exists—there used to be like an association of features editors awards. And the section won. Back then, the *N&O* would match prize money, so it ended up being like a thousand dollars or something when they matched it. My name was on the award, but I thought, you know, it's not really fair, because I didn't do this all by myself, and I thought I might be able to make a little currency out of this, too, so I invited everybody who'd worked on the section, the photographer who'd taken the pictures, everybody, and their spouses and I talked to Ben over at Magnolia Grill and we had, I paid for everybody to go have dinner at Magnolia Grill with that money. Boy, that bought me a lot of goodwill for many years. [Laughter] So, you can't do everything yourself. There's a recognition that other people were involved. No one ever told me I couldn't ask reporters to write stories, so I started doing that. Easier to ask forgiveness than

permission, because it's nice to have—nobody wants to hear my voice all the time, as entertaining and brilliant as I am. Then, with the other piece of what you asked, joining organizations like the Association of Food Journalists, I joined that as soon as I could. It's been incredibly helpful with everybody kind of dealing with the same issues, you can talk to each other and then you get connections. So if, say, a Cajun restaurant opened up, I could call up Judy Walker and say, "Hey, we got a Cajun restaurant here, of all things, now. Tell me what should be at this place?" Things like that. It's always helpful to have other people who are in your situation and that you can learn from.

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Annemarie N.: Can you talk about your involvement in some of those organizations?

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Debbie M.: Yeah, I've been a member of the Association of Food Journalists for a really long time. I'm a past president. I think I've been everything but treasurer because, like I said, I'm no good with numbers. It's just been extremely helpful. I've learned a lot from going to the annual conferences and just from being able to talk to people that I've met and had a lot of fun, too. Southern Foodways, constantly learn from that and the oral histories being online are a great resource. I actually read some of those and they were helpful when I was working on the seafood book. Let's see, what else. That was probably the main things.

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Annemarie N.: That's great. I'm glad to know people are reading 'em and using 'em.

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Debbie M.: Oh, really. They were really helpful with *Southern Holidays*, too, 'cause that one I was picking out—I don't know if you've seen it—

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Annemarie N.: Mm-hm.

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Debbie M.: I was picking out a range of different holidays throughout the year and trying to get some ideas, so it was really helpful for that, too.

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Annemarie N.: That's great, I'm sure. I want to talk about those in a little bit, too. But I have a question a little bit. You mentioned about taking some classes. How did you—I know you approach food writing from a journalist's perspective, but how did you learn those technical skills? Like what was that process like?

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Debbie M.: Well, some of it was just on my own. I think any time you get interested in something, you want to learn more about it and you start trying to do that. Like I did get interested in Cajun food, and so I took some classes in that to learn what the important

parts of that were. Things that are kind of technical, like bread baking, that involves some learning. But a lot of it was just things I decided to learn on my own, like okay, I'm doing all this—and also just doing the cooking instead of just writing about it, because I began to want to do more of that. As you learn more about these things. The ironic thing, I think, is that when I was food editor at the paper, I had no time to cook. I was there till 6:00 or 6:30, 7:00 at night, and I'd have no time to cook. Now, that was one thing when I decided to freelance, and it was going to be, okay, no more Lean Cuisines. I'm going to cook actual food. And I enjoy that.

[00:36:42]

Annemarie N.: That's great. How do you feel like the food section kind of transformed you or how did you evolve as a journalist taking on that section?

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Debbie M.: I think I learned a lot about time management. I learned a lot about editing because you really have to look at the details. Boy, I tell you what, hell hath no fury like the readers that call when a recipe is messed up. When it says a tablespoon of salt when it's supposed to be a teaspoon. So looking for all of that, making sure things are clear. Because that's the other thing, they'll call you, you know, oh, you've printed this recipe and I don't understand what you're telling me to do. Making sure things are clear, that they're correct. And just being open to a wide variety of things. I didn't feel confined by the topic of writing about food, even though it wasn't as broad as a newspaper back that it was now—now, it's anything. I did not feel constrained by that at all. I also, then, and to

some extent now, it's still primarily women who cook. I like to be able to provide some information, some things that women can use and learn from, and so many people say, oh, you know, I can't cook, or I don't have any time. Well, you can. You can, and here's why you should. So, it just really . . . I don't know why everybody wouldn't want to write about food. [Laughter]

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Annemarie N.: I tend to agree with you. [Laughter] You're mentioning about disgruntled . . . people. [Laughter] That seems to be a theme, every single person I've interviewed has mentioned this.

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Debbie M.: Oh, I'm not the first person to mention that, okay. I didn't think I was, okay.

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Annemarie N.: Everybody has mentioned that. You're busy, obviously, doing all these things. How do you have time, or did you have time, or funds to either recipe test or how did you decide to choose the recipes that you chose?

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Debbie M.: Oh, there was no recipe testing. Not at the *N&O* [Laughter] Again, that's something that—a larger paper might have a test kitchen and do that, but not at the *N&O* when I was there. Unless I wanted to bring something here to the house and do it, which I—I did

sometimes, near the end of my time there, if we wanted a photograph, completed food. There was no testing. I'm sorry, what was the first part of your question?

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Annemarie N.: That was the question. It was just about, well, and how did you choose recipes?

[00:40:05]

Debbie M.: How I choose recipes has changed, but back then, there were certain famous names that people liked to see in the paper, like Craig Claiborne or Pierre Franey. I think it was Pierre Franey when I was there, he had a column called the *60 Minute Gourmet*, and that was considered brief. You wouldn't think that now. So, there was things like that that people wanted to see and they'd look for, syndicated columns. There was a column that started while I was there called *Specialty of the House*. Somebody would write in and say, "Oh, I love the soup at such and such restaurant, can you get the recipe?" That was a freelancer. She would get the recipe from the restaurant if they were willing to give it, and then put it in the paper. If they were not willing to give it, she would try to come up with a facsimile of it. That was an extremely popular column. I had the vegetarian guy for a while. I may have been a little ahead of the curve on him.

[00:41:30]

Annemarie N.: Can you talk a little bit about that column? Because that's really interesting.

[00:41:34]

Debbie M.: Well, there was just becoming some interest in vegetarianism, and healthy eating and all those kind of things. I just thought it would be interesting to have that, and so that's when I started looking for somebody; there was nothing syndicated, nothing that we could just buy that was already being written. So, I forgot how I found this guy. I started asking around, maybe at some vegetarian restaurants, and he was a home cook—well, a guy, first of all, but he was a home cook who was actually vegan, and I said, "We're not, no. Bridge too far." We're not doing vegan here. He says, "No, I get that. I get that." He says, "And there'll be no proselytizing in the column." I said, "Good, because I won't have it. Just about if you want to eat vegetarian here or recipes, here are ways to do it. Here's how to cook beans." And he was pretty good. He took a lot of editing, because people who aren't professional writers often will take some editing. It was a labor-intensive column for me, because he took some editing. But he was open to it. His recipes were good. And he moved, he and his wife moved to Texas and he continued to do that. We ran that maybe a couple years before he was in graduate school and just didn't have time anymore. So, yeah, I was pretty excited about that being in there. It got pretty good response. Back then, it was sort of a small but vocal group of people would be—sort of like the people who like the bridge columns, small but vocal. [Laughter] Vocal group of people who are really interested in it.

[00:43:35]

Annemarie N.: That's really interesting. Did you have any other kind of ahead of the curve things that you could see were on the cusp that you—any columns or any stories that you ran or that you wrote yourself?

[00:43:54]

Debbie M.: We had a column called "The Recipe Doctor," and the woman that wrote it was a—I think she approached us. She was a nutritionist, and she wanted to take some home favorite recipes somebody has and show how it can be made lower in salt, lower in fat, and still taste like the thing that your family really loves. So, we had that and that was really popular. It was very popular, because people would send in those gooey family things. I'm not a nutritionist, I'm not trained in that area, but yet I know nutrition is important to a lot of people, so I'm going to look for somebody who has that training. I'm not going to try to go get it myself. So, having her was great. Something that was maybe not as successful that I really wanted to try was trying to find an African American voice. There were no African American columnists that I could find in a syndicate, in a syndicated, that we could just buy. So I finally found a local woman, and the column probably didn't have enough of a focus. I don't think it worked out as well. As far as ways of writing, I kept just approaching them like I would a features story, and I didn't know you weren't supposed to do that. You know? One I remember doing was about peaches. You know, every summer, there's peaches. You have to do a peach story. I found out that south of here, Lee County, a lot of peaches are grown there, and I found out sort of the history about how it became such a peach growing area. It ended up being a little romantic. I talked to this, went down there and met this woman. She and her husband had—[Door Opens] Sorry.

[00:46:14]

Annemarie N.: It's okay.

[00:46:14]

Debbie M.: She and her husband had, like, met in the peach orchard, and it was just incredibly romantic. So I wrote this incredibly romantic story about peaches. And it's probably, if I can find it today, it's probably horribly overblown. But it was sort of in a period where that became popular, to write about food in some kind of romantic, sexy way. [Laughter]

[00:46:44]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Could you—this is kind of like a big question. Let me just throw this at you. [Laughter] But can you talk about the things that you're most proud of, in your journalism career, but more specifically speaking, your career as a food editor of the *News & Observer*?

[00:47:09]

Debbie M.: Well, I'm really proud that we sort of broadened it out a little bit from the usual fifty ways to cook a chicken breast. Which would have been fine. Everyone would have been okay with that. I was really happy that we sort of pushed that out a little bit. I was happy that I was at least able to try to get some more diverse voices in there. I didn't do it necessarily successfully, but we did try. And I'm really happy the way that we all worked together on it. I hope that—I think that the photographers and the other people enjoyed working on the food section, because we could be a little bit creative. There was more space and things like that. You could be a little creative. It is one place where you can be

kind of creative, and just kind of have some fun sometimes. 'Cause food isn't always a serious subject. [Laughter]

[00:48:21]

Annemarie N.: It can be really fun. Can you talk a little bit too about why you decided to leave and what time was that around?

[00:48:30]

Debbie M.: Um, I left in [19]98, yeah. I left in [19]98. It was before all the layoffs started, and there was no threat of that, but just a lot of things were changing. It was kind of getting not as fun anymore. I still enjoyed it, but there were just a lot of changes going on, and I just kind of felt like maybe moving in to doing something else. It's hard work. Newspaper work is hard. Editing work is hard, time consuming. I just kind of felt maybe it was time to try something else. I ended up leaving there and going to the domestic violence agency here in Raleigh. I worked there for about three years as a crisis counselor, something completely different. But I'd volunteered there. But I still did freelance food stories, I still wrote the column for the paper. I've done that column . . . God, I don't even want to think about it, thirty years or so? Used to be called *Sunday Dinner* when it was on Sunday, then they moved it to Wednesday, so that didn't make sense. So, now it's called *Side Dish*. But it's still the same column. I did another column for a while as a freelancer called *Tasteful Garden*. I worked with a garden writer, and we were trying to encourage people to put edibles in their yards, and so she wrote about how to grow something, and then I would

write about how to cook it, cook with it or store it, and then a really short—I'd develop a short little recipe. But I just felt like it was maybe time to do something else for a while.

[00:50:30]

Annemarie N.: That sounds like quite a different but really valuable career change.

[00:50:35]

Debbie M.: It was different, but I was still doing some of the food. I was—oh, I was even, WUNC Radio, they had some kind of a show back then where I would go over there once a month and talk about food. I can't remember what that was called. It's not what's there now. So, I was still doing some of those things, just . . . it felt like it was time to do something else.

[00:50:59]

Annemarie N.: Definitely. Can you talk about your decision to write cookbooks? Because you've written seven, and they're all really different. [Laughter]

[00:51:07]

Debbie M.: Yeah, yeah. As I said, I worked at the domestic violence agency for about three years, and my mother got sick. That and some other things, I had a handicapped sister, some other things going on. It was just not a good time to have to punch a time clock, so I left that to sort of take care of those things. When that was all done, I wasn't sure I really wanted to go work in an office again, because there's advantages to not being in an office.

So, I started talking to a friend of mine who'd written several cookbooks. I said, "Well, you know, I think I'm going to freelance and try to keep doing the column, do some other things." She said, "Oh, you ought to write a cookbook." And the thought had never crossed my mind. I said, "I've never written a cookbook." She said, "Oh, you should. You should write a cookbook." She just gave me the name of her agent and insisted I call her agent in New York. And so I came up with a couple of ideas. I can't even remember what they were. So, I called this agent and I threw out one of them. She says, "No, don't like that." I threw out another one, she said, "Oh, no, no, that's been done, no." So then I was out of ideas. I was like, "Um, um, how about a book on um, um, deviled eggs?" She says, "I like that." [Laughter] It just came out of the air. So, she had to help me write a book proposal. I'd never written a book proposal, so she helped me do that, and she shopped it around to publishers and finally found one. So, that's—the interesting thing about that is, I ended up having only . . . it was the end of January. Only about three and a half months to finish this book, which is insane. I would never agree to that now. I didn't know any better, and I was used to deadlines, so I had three and a half months to finish fifty recipes for deviled eggs. [Laughter] It was interesting.

[00:53:26]

Annemarie N.: I'll bet. Can you go through the process of developing recipes and just kind of like creating a cookbook? What was that first process like?

[00:53:37]

Debbie M.: Well, it kind of depends on the book. A lot of the books I've done are called single subject, and that's like, deviled eggs, wings, potato salad, are three of them. Buttermilk. Single subject. And you explore everything you could possibly do with that one thing. For deviled eggs, eggs are a pretty blank canvas. So I just started thinking about, okay, what goes into omelets? What goes into quiches? What goes into cheesecake? I have two sweet ones in there. Then I started just wandering around the grocery store and staring at the shelves. [Laughter] Thinking about what kind of things might go in there. I like different kinds of food, like I'd go over to the Lebanese market over here and look at what they had, look at the Japanese market and look at what they had, and just think about things that could go in there. Spicy, different kinds of toppings, different kinds of . . . take the yolk out completely, put something else in there. One thing that did not make it in the book was trying to pickle a—deviled egg pickled egg. That was not real great. It was like pickling a golf ball, or deviling a golf ball. It was not . . . I had these two single guys that lived next door. I took 'em over there. I said, “Bill, try this and tell me what you think.” He came over and he said, “Deb, don't put that in your book.” [Laughter] I thought, they wouldn't eat it? It definitely wasn't going in the book. [Laughter] So, in the case of deviled eggs, that's kind of the thought process. With potato salad, to some extent, something kind of similar, thinking about okay, what if you don't use white potatoes? What if you use sweet potatoes? What if you use purple potatoes? What if you grill the potatoes instead of boiling them? Just all those different—what if you use some different technique, what if you do this? What if you do that? Then trying to come up with what seems like a really classic offering, because people really like to have the classic. For wings, my husband and I are sports fans, which is why I have a book on tailgating and

wings and all that. Buttermilk was a little different, because buttermilk has such a historic place in Southern cooking. My book on buttermilk—and Kathleen Purvis's book on pecans were the two in, first two in *Savor the South* series. So, it was interesting to find out just how significant the history is and how the use of buttermilk in the South fits into Southern history, and the chemistry behind it. Right now, we are about ten minutes from the campus of North Carolina State University, and they have a dairy department. So, I went over there. They were glad to tell me more than I would ever want to know about exactly, chemically, what buttermilk is and why it does what it does. I got a whole bunch of free pints of really good ice cream that they make, too. [Laughter]

[00:57:18]

Annemarie N.: That's a nice perk.

[00:57:18]

Debbie M.: Yes, a very nice perk. Howling Cow Ice Cream.

[00:57:23]

Annemarie N.: That sounds good.

[00:57:23]

Debbie M.: You ever see it? Eat it. It's really good. [Laughter]

[00:57:27]

Annemarie N.: I'll definitely do that. Your *Southern Holidays* book is a little different, because it's like this not really big book, I think it's about a hundred pages, and it's like, here's this—all these holidays just kind of packed into this small book. How did you decide what holidays to profile? Some of them, obviously, you'll do, and then like the recipes that you chose, too.

[00:57:54]

Debbie M.: Yeah. It was really difficult, the front end of *Southern Holidays* was more difficult than the other books because I could have written a book four times this long. And you have to have Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, Passover, Hanukah, Kwanzaa. There were certain things I had to have, but I didn't want the book to be just about those holidays, so I tried to select things that would be throughout the year, and try to give people a little bit of a taste of the diversity of the South, both in population and in the types of cultural celebrations. So, it was a lot of big judgment call on things. For example, I've got Greek Festival in there. I picked that out because Greeks have had a really significant presence in the South for a long time. A lot of people don't know that. Also I had a couple of really good recipes I wanted to use. And the importance of the coast and seafood, I started thinking about that. Okay, how can I bring some—a little honor to that? Well, then the blessing of the fleet celebrations that happen all over the coastal South. I think that was where the oral histories really came in handy, because I would say—I certainly could have written about one in North Carolina. I was also trying to spread it around the South, not all North Carolina. I looked at that, and so I found one in Louisiana that had the added interest of the fact that a lot of Vietnamese immigrants are now a lot of the

fishermen there. So, I could bring in a little different kind of a recipe while recognizing that. So, that's sort of what I was trying to do, to look at how I could represent a little bit culturally and location-wise, and still vary the type of recipe, not have it all be cakes. Despite the fact that this is delicious coconut cake on the cover. One of the biggest problems we had was what to put on the cover, because we didn't want anything that would scream Christmas, because then people would look at it and think, oh, it's just a Christmas book. So, that was the thing we went really back and forth about, was what to do. The coconut cake's really important. Coconut has an interesting story. So, that makes sense. Then they put all this kind of colorful confetti in the background to suggest celebrating, party, in a way that doesn't scream Christmas or Thanksgiving. But yeah, it was a lot of explaining to my editor, okay, here's what I'm doing, and here's why I'm picking these things. And then explaining it in the book to people, like, here's how I made these calls. And yeah, it could have been a whole lot of other things. You know? I'm sorry if your favorite thing isn't here, but this is what I was thinking. It also enabled me to do a little bit more writing, because I felt like every holiday needed a little bit of an explanation, like a couple hundred word beginning. So, that's another way that it looks different from the other books in the series, and I had to talk to my editor about that, I really think it needs this. So, I was able to explain that and do a little bit more writing. That was enjoyable for me to do that.

[01:02:33]

Annemarie N.: Definitely. Gives it a lot of really nice context. Did you, for the *Savoring the South* cookbooks, did you pitch those ideas or did they kind of come to you and say, "Hey, here's what we're thinking about?"

[01:02:47]

Debbie M.: Well, "Buttermilk, a Southern Foodways Symposium," is responsible for that. There was one on libations. Mr. Cruze, from Cruze Farm, came and talked about buttermilk. I don't know if you've ever heard him or met him, but he's very colorful. He says, "If more people drink buttermilk, they could throw away from Viagra." And I was sitting next to the editor. I knew the editor, Elaine, I knew her, and I said, "Oh, Elaine, we've got to do a book on buttermilk. I've got to do a book on buttermilk." And so, that ended up being one of the first ones. That's sort of how that happened. Then, for *Southern Holidays*, I was ready to do another book, and I kind of had a couple ideas. Then a previous publisher of mine contacted me, and they were wanting me to come do another book for them, and I didn't really want to, because I really have liked working with Elaine and with UNC. And so I just called her up and I said, "They're buggin' me and I really don't want to go back there." I said, "Are there any books in the series that you still have out, that you're looking for writers?" She rattled off some, and then she got to *Southern Holidays*. I said, "Oh, I'll take that one." [Laughter] She said, "Yeah, we'd love for you to do it." I said, "Okay, great." [Laughter]

[01:04:24]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Could we talk too about your newest book that's out, *Carolina Catch*?

[01:04:33]

Debbie M.: Sure.

[01:04:33]

Annemarie N.: This one is even a little more different than the other ones, because it's all about Carolina seafood.

[01:04:41.13]

Debbie M.: Yeah. It's also bigger. It's got ninety-two recipes and a lot of information. It's probably the biggest book I've written. I love fish, I love seafood. Why? It's amazing. Because I certainly didn't grow up with it. But I always cook it at home. If I look at a menu, usually the fish is the more interesting item to me. A friend of mine had written a book about Florida seafood, and a beautiful book. I thought, you know, well, I don't see why we couldn't do something like that here. We're a very fishy state. We're just as fishy as Florida. And we are, we have a lot of fish. So, I came up with the idea and pitched it to them. Another thing I wanted to do was try to really help people get out of their rut. Like, there are more fish than flounder out there. We should and need to use them. I mean, things that once were called trash fish, they're not trash. With concerns about overfishing and things like that, it's more income for fishermen if you eat these other kinds of fish. And they're just good. They taste good. I'm willing to encourage people to look at other

kinds of fish, as well. One important thing I learned being a newspaper food editor was, you can tell people all these altruistic reasons for why they should do something; you can do that all day long. But what often will make a difference is if you tell them it tastes better. Give them a chance to taste it, and they say, yeah, this fresh shrimp really tastes better than the stuff from Indonesia. Flavor will make a difference. So, I put—almost every recipe has alternatives, like I may have tested a recipe with using sheepshead, which is a great fish, and then I've got an alternative. Like okay, if you can't find sheepshead, here's three or four other kinds of fish that will work just as well. And I also wanted to have a chart in there: okay, if you like snapper, here's something else you might like. Get you away from the snapper so much. If you want to grill something, here's something, here's going to have a similar texture to Mahi, so it's going to work for you on the grill. Because when I was working on this book, I worked on it for about a year and a half, and I asked every single person I interviewed—chefs, experts—do people have a fear of fish? Every one of them said yes. So, I've got, I'm trying to sort of help people. Call me your fish therapist. I'm just trying to help you over those fears and phobias. [Laughter]

[01:07:52]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Do you use it to look at any other kind of lenses, like economics or environmental or health or different things like that? Did it ever come up in the book, or did it come up when you were researching it?

[01:08:11]

Debbie M.: A little bit . . . I find that a book has to be focused somewhat. I make reference in here to environmental issues, to issues that are putting pressure on fishermen right now, economic and political issues. That is a huge thing. You could do a whole book just on that, and writers like Paul Greenberg have. What I did was, I made reference to it and said, educate yourself. Here's some resources. Please go and pursue these resources. Because it's also a moving target; it changes. You know, here's resources for you to go and learn about these issues, because it affects what you can eat on your plate. It affects you getting that. Mostly, I'm hoping to make people understand why they should care about that, rather than turning myself into an expert in fish politics, which would be impossible.

[01:09:20]

Annemarie N.: I believe it. Could you, do you have anything else you want to say about the cookbooks that you've written? Anything that I haven't asked you, or that you just really want to mention?

[01:09:35]

Debbie M.: Well, I never thought I'd write one, much less seven. It's a lot of work, but it's fun. People will ask me, "How do you write a cookbook?" For me, it's as much a mental exercise, because before I ever start writing, I will sit down and think about—well, like with *Carolina Catch*, how do I want this book to look? What are the important things I want people to take away? Then for the recipes, making sure there's variety. All my recipes, I don't want anything that's too weirdly complicated. You know? Something

that's interesting, that's got interesting ingredients. But I think most people don't want something that's—what I keep hearing from people is, oh, I like your recipes because I don't have to go to three different grocery stores to get the ingredients. Now, to spice things up, I get a few chef recipes and put those in there, and those—boy, you talk about testing. Phew. Because chefs work on a whole other level. It's not their fault, but chef recipes are—any food writer will tell you, they're land mines. You have to really go over them carefully. But just to spice things up and add some interest, like someone will go, oh, I've been to that restaurant. I want to read this. But mostly, I want people to learn something and get in their kitchen and start cooking, because I've gotten over the years where that's really the fun, is to cook something and to have people enjoy it. And people come over. My husband and I are pretty famous for parties we throw; we throw a lot of parties. We have a big party every December, for the last thirty years. We cook jambalaya and red beans and rice. After we went to New Orleans for the first time, we fell in love with it. This is before I even started writing about food, I think. You can make a lot of it, as you probably know, and we make a whole bunch of it and invite people over. Since people are so bad at RSVP'ing, we don't know how many people are going to show up, but that's okay, because we always have enough food. And, you know, make some salad and make—there's an infamous green bean salad I have to make every year. I've gotten to where I make about ten pounds of green bean salad, and we must make, gosh, two batches of red beans and rice, about three or four batches of jambalaya. And then we ask people to bring desserts if they want to do that, and the table's usually covered in dessert in there, the dining table. Really, we've had like forty, forty-five, forty people in here. We're not really sure. [Laughter] One year, I'm standing in here next to

my husband and I see somebody I don't recognize. So I said, “Rob, who's that?” He says “ . . . I thought it was somebody you knew. I don't know who that is.” So I said, “Okay, now people are just wandering in off the street?” [Laughter] But turned out it was somebody's spouse that neither of us had met, so it was legitimate. That is so much work, I cannot tell you how much work it is to do that. And clean up afterwards.

[01:13:32]

Annemarie N.: I can only imagine.

[01:13:32]

Debbie M.: The cleaning up afterwards is, you know, especially after you've been up and enjoying yourself . . . the next day. But we're not going to stop doing it until we're under the ground, because it's just so much fun to see people come and enjoy themselves, and people who maybe have never—like, we all have our own worlds. My husband has people he knows, I have people I know, to see those orbs kind of intersect in really strange ways. We've had so many people tell us, “I meet such interesting people at your parties.” Because it's just these intersecting worlds, and just, it's so much fun. Just to have people come over. I think people, I hear from people that they don't know how to entertain or they think it's too much work or . . . it's just fun to me to see what happens when you throw some people together and start talking. I would hope I write cookbooks that encourage people to do that.

[01:14:47]

Annemarie N.: That's great. Can you talk a little bit too about some of the freelance work that you've been doing, writing—you mentioned the columns that you've written and that continue to write for the *News & Observer*, but what are some other places that you do freelance work for?

[01:15:03]

Debbie M.: I have a column that runs in a magazine called *West Virginia South*, published in West Virginia, and it's a magazine that comes out every other month. And it's a similar-type column, and sometimes I have a recipe that goes with it. Excuse me. I have had pieces in *Our State* magazine. [Pours Water] I've had a piece in the first *Cornbread Nation*, the very first one. Any place that will pay me promptly and, well . . . [Laughter] Yes, I'm open to work. I guess those are the most regular. I'm trying to think. Those are probably the most regular places. I do a lot of work for the *N&O* still because I'm here and I know the area and everything.

[01:16:17]

Annemarie N.: That's great. I have one more question for you, and this is kind of like a big question that just kind of like an opinion-y thing. So what do you see as the future of food writing, whether it be cookbooks or journalism in Raleigh and in the South? And maybe even in the United States as a whole? Where do you see that going?

[01:16:39]

Debbie M.: I think it's just going to continue to expand into a lot of other things. I wonder sometimes if there'll be, like . . . let me start over. I think there's a recognition now that food touches so many parts of our lives that I think a lot of, or my hope would be, a lot of different kinds of people are going to be writing about food as they see how it pertains to that portion of their lives, if that makes sense. Rather than it being so stuck in one place. And there's a lot of significant work being done in food writing and food journalism—*The Jemima Code*, *The Cooking Gene* by Michael Twitty, whose blog is hysterical. It's a great blog. I don't see why it can't continue as people see the significance. As far as newspapers, of course, newspapers are struggling. I'm not sure where the future is there, because they keep getting cut back so much. One thing I've noticed with newspapers, not just the *N&O*, they seem to be focusing more on restaurants, restaurant comings and goings. Because I guess that's what some people want to read about. It's not of much interest to me. I don't find those interesting. Now, restaurant reviewing is interesting. I've never done it. But there is a significant group of people that think that being anonymous is not important, and maybe impossible. I don't agree with that. Restaurant reviewing seems to have maybe declined a little bit in smaller markets because, if something gets cut, it's easy to cut that and instead just write about new place opening, old place closing. I'd like to see more written about the business of food and how that's significant, what restaurants and the food world contribute to the economies of cities and why that's important. And also wage issues. But there's a lot that can be written about, and there's a lot of people interested in writing about it. That's good. Last year, I got asked to go back over to UNC and speak to a feature writing class. They were all very interested in writing about food in some way, because I think now, they see the significance of all that. Most

college campuses have campus gardens now. I think the broadening of food journalism is a good thing; bringing in more voices. I am sort of sad that the print offerings are not the way they used to be because that's just where I came out of. So . . .

[01:20:52]

Annemarie N.: No, that's great.

[01:20:53]

Debbie M.: Okay.

[01:20:54]

Annemarie N.: Thank you so much. Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you want to add or that you want to talk about?

[01:21:00]

Debbie M.: Hmm. Gosh. We've talked about a lot. [Laughter] How you write about people you know without writing them out. [Laughter] My husband's a part of my life, he eats things, and I write about him, but I decided that I would give him some anonymity, and so he's the hub. [Laughter]

[01:21:32]

Annemarie N.: I noticed that.

[01:21:32]

Debbie M.: He is the hub. He gets some anonymity. But he secretly enjoys the attention. He also, after I wrote a whole book on buttermilk, he found out he was allergic to dairy products.

[01:21:47]

Annemarie N.: Oh, no.

[01:21:47]

Debbie M.: [Laughter]

[01:21:52]

Annemarie N.: That's so unfortunate.

[01:21:54]

Debbie M.: Oh, so, we have adjusted that. But I can't . . . think of anything else, I guess. This has been fun. I hope I gave you something interesting.

[01:22:05]

Annemarie N.: It was great. Thank you very much.

[*End of interview*]