

DUKE EVERSMEYER

Longtime customer of Bowen's Island Restaurant – Lives in Metairie, LA

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Location: Center for the Study of Southern Culture – University, MS

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 20 minutes

Project: Bowen's Island Restaurant

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Southern Foodways Alliance

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[Begin Duke Eversmeyer 1 Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Friday, March 23, 2007, and I am at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture with Duke Eversmeyer and we're here to talk about Bowen's Island Restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina. And Duke, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and your birth date for the record, please.

00:00:19

Duke Eversmeyer: Oh, my name is Duke Eversmeyer, and I was born on December 26, 1945.

00:00:28

AE: Okay. And you were stationed in the Navy in the—in Charleston in the '70s, is that right?

00:00:32

DE: That's correct, I was. I had just finished my internship, and this was during the Vietnam War. And they told me I was going to Vietnam and I said, "Well," you know, "they must be—." You know I didn't—I volunteered to come into the Navy. You do that to the enlisted—to, you know, the draftees; it must be something better you can do for that. And they said, "Well we might be able to get you on a submarine." So I said, "Well that's got to be better—that's got to be better than being in Vietnam." Which I guess it was but—. And anyway, that's why I got sent down to Charleston. We had a big submarine base there and I was—I was stationed there for two years, 1971 through 1973.

00:01:10

AE: Can I back up just for a second and ask where you were born and—and grew up and—and how different Charleston was from any of that experience?

00:01:16

DE: I grew up in New Orleans. And, you know, any place you grow up is just the place you grow up. You don't pay attention to all the things that are there. And then I—I went to Medical School at the University of Mississippi; my folks had moved to Greenwood, Mississippi. And then so I lived in Jackson, Mississippi, for Medical School, interned in Boston, and then came back to Charleston. And my—my impression of Charleston was that it was like a small clean friendly New Orleans. They had great restaurants. The people were—were Southern in—in their demeanor and their hospitality—friendliness—and they were—and there was a lot of—lot of nice waterways and beaches and things. You could go enjoy the water—fishing, hunting—I wasn't a hunter but I was a fisherman and—and it was a lot like New Orleans, I thought.

00:02:04

AE: Do you remember how you first heard of Bowen's Island Restaurant?

00:02:07

DE: It must have been from friends. I think maybe somebody—my—my wife has a cousin [Barbara Jergenson], who lived there, and I think that's how we got there. She has a cousin who lives there and—did back then and I think—I think it was one of their habits to go to Bowen's Island, and we were taken there. I don't think I'd have gone there by myself because I didn't—it's kind of hard to find and hard to get to. But I think we went with family.

00:02:36

AE: Uh-hmm. And what do you remember from that first experience?

00:02:37

DE: Well I remember there wasn't any place quite like this in New Orleans. It's—it's way out in the marsh and you know Charleston is about the marsh. The marsh—Charleston is surrounded by the marsh and the marsh is—is a very hallowed thing to Charlestonians. It—you've got to—have to drive out a long, long way from downtown Charleston to—you got to cross over the Wapoo Creek Bridge, which there's stories about that too, and then drive all the way down the road to Folly Beach. Oh, maybe eight miles and before you get to Folly Beach you turn off—it was not a paved road or a gravel road. It's just sort of a dirt road, except for when it's been raining and it's a mud road, and you go up maybe 300-yards or more up into the—the marsh and—and you got to have faith that it's there and **[Laughs]** soon you—you hit a concrete—the worst looking concrete block thing you've ever seen. But that's not the restaurant; you've got to go around that to get to the restaurant. That's the facilities. **[Laughs]** So if you have to—make sure you're—you've been to the bathroom before you go or you have to use those facilities. **[Laughs]** And then the second worst looking concrete block building you've ever seen is—you end up there with a pier on the outside, and that's Bowen's Island.

00:03:56

AE: I'm actually—.

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[End Duke Eversmeyer 1; Begin Duke Eversmeyer 2]

00:00:02

AE: So you were talking about your first time that you arrived at Bowen's Island and describing how it looked and everything. And so that was in the '70s and Bowen's Island would have been open for a couple of decades by that time. Do you have a memory of how many people it—it sat and how much graffiti was on the wall and how, if you visited decades later, it had changed over those intervening years?

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DE: We went back—at—at first, I don't remember graffiti. Maybe it's there; it just—it doesn't—I don't remember it. This was back in '71—would have been in '71, the summer of 1971 and it was—it was divided in half. It had—it had a seafood menu where you could get fried seafood, but they featured roasted oysters. Mr. [Jimmy] Bowen was there, and he was the one that ran the place at the time. He was—he was elderly. But the reason it was divided in half was if you—if you got—you could—if you wanted roasted oysters, you had—you could get all the roasted oysters you wanted for three bucks. And I'm sure it's ten times that now, but it was for three bucks. You got to go in the back room. But if you didn't go order roasted oysters, you had to stay in the front room because he was afraid you would eat somebody else's roasted oysters, and that wasn't part of the deal. So you'd get fried shrimp or, you know, fried oysters or other seafood—fish and things like that—and stay up front. But you couldn't get back with the oyster eaters if you—if you didn't eat roasted oysters. Roasted oysters were an interesting thing, and I had never heard of them, you know. We eat oysters in just about every other fashion in New Orleans, you know: raw oysters, oysters in the half-shell, Oysters Rockefeller. But—Oysters Bienville—but we—we never had roasted oysters, which is a neat way to eat them. You—they—

you know how they do that, they—they take oysters and they take a whole bunch of raw oysters and shovel them on some burlap sacks that have been soaked and on top of the fire, and they put more soaked burlap sacks on top of that and until the oysters pop open and they're almost raw but they're a little bit cooked—a little bit tougher than raw oysters—taste pretty much the same and then you eat them—eat them off—right out of the shell. The—the—you know, they have cocktail sauce that you eat them with. I never heard of that, but it's a fun thing to do and—and it's—it's evolved at least—. I didn't know people did this when I was living in Charleston, but they have what's called oyster roasts now, where it's just like a crawfish boil down in New Orleans. People get together and have—roast some oysters and sit around the table and drink beer and spend two or three hours just talking and—and eating oysters. But they—they were roasted oysters. I came back, I think, somewhere in the mid-'80s for a wedding, and it hadn't change much; it was pretty much the same. I don't remember the rooms being divided, but I'm pretty sure they were. I mean they kept everything the same.

00:03:11

AE: So when you were stationed in the Navy and you were going to Bowen's Island, how often would you say you went there?

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DE: I'd say three or four times a year. It was—it was fun to take people there that had never been there. Like if somebody would visit you from out of town. Parents were incredulous when we took them to a place that looked—looked like that but always enjoyed the meal. The meal was very good. The oysters were—were unique. And then Navy buddies, you know, would take,

you know, Navy people from all over the country, so it was kind of a fun event to go out there with 10 people and sit around and drink beer and eat roasted oysters and—and just schmooze.

00:03:45

AE: Can you describe what the scene may have been like on a Friday night in the '70s when you were there?

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DE: It was never really quiet—crowded. It wasn't a big—it wasn't a big fancy place or—or a popular place to go. It was just a place people knew about and occasionally wanted to get roasted oysters. I wasn't aware of any place else they did that at that time; that's where you had to go to get roasted oysters. In the summertime it was a lot busier because there were people at the beach, you know, living at the beach. Of course summer is not a good time for oysters, but they didn't know that, I guess, but they had them oysters all year round. They were open all year around. It was a place I'd go—you could go to fish there. They had a nice pier and you could go so sit out on the—on the dock and fish and catch some fish, crabs—catch crabs there.

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AE: Did you do a lot of that yourself?

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DE: Occasionally, yeah. I'd have an afternoon off or something, and I couldn't find anybody to play golf with, so I'd go sit out there and just bring a six-pack and fishing pole and go fishing.

00:04:43

AE: Did you go there often enough that you developed a rapport with Mr. and Mrs. Bowen or any of the oyster roasters?

00:04:49

DE: Yeah, Mr. Bowen. Mr. Bowen got to be an acquaintance. He—he—he knew me enough to where he would chuckle when he told his story. And his story—I think his story was a device to get people to stop eating oysters. He—he was always there and he was always hanging around and did talk to you and telling interesting stories. But when he figured out—he had kind of calculated—you had eaten enough of your \$3.00 worth of oysters, he'd tell the story about how he had his—his cornea transplant and he'd tell—describe it in great detail. And so after hearing about his cornea transplant, you really couldn't eat any more oysters.

00:05:33

AE: He was ready to get you out of there, huh?

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DE: Yeah, he—he had figured you had—had enough. But yeah, he—he and I knew each other. He'd sell me bait to go fishing outside, and he was kind of a crotchety guy. Of course he was older and crotchety, but I guess he had made his living off of this old place for 50—60 years. I have no idea when he died. I guess he has died. He was real old back then. Who is running the place now, do you know?

00:05:57

AE: Mrs. Barber's grandson, Robert—or Mrs. Bowen's, I'm sorry, grandson, Robert [Barber].

00:06:05

DE: Yeah. I remember back in those days. Let's see—that was on television. The television news on NBC was a group—it was two fellows named Huntley and Brinkley; it was the *Huntley Brinkley Report*. Most people watched Walter Cronkite, but it was the *Huntley Brinkley Report*. And David Brinkley was enamored of Bowen's Island, and he would report about it all the time, and he'd come down there and occasionally you actually see him. "David Brinkley is in town going to Bowen's Island," so it got a little bit of notoriety.

00:06:36

AE: Do you have memories of Citadel Cadets going there and interacting with them at all?

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DE: No, no, I don't remember Citadel Cadets going there. I—you know when Citadel Cadets, in those days, when they were off campus, they were all dressed up. They had to wear their—their dress uniforms and I do remember going—seeing them all over the town at restaurants and it was—it was—they were very impressive. I do remember college kids and they were probably from the College of Charleston, which at the time was not a branch of the University of South Carolina. It was a small Liberal Arts college, which actually my wife was going to at the time, and they were a rowdier bunch. So it probably was a good college hang out—cheap food, plenty of beer.

00:07:21

AE: So coming from New Orleans, I mean you mentioned there wasn't anything—anyplace like that in New Orleans and coming from the culture that is New Orleans and then now having those

experiences at Bowen's Island, what—what do you think a place like that means culturally to a place like Charleston?

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DE: Well I think it—it enhances the—the concept of Charleston being an oyster town. They have a salt marsh that surrounds the city. And I'm sure the oysters are just wonderful there—at least they were back then and—and points out that oysters are an important part of the seafood staple there in—in Charleston. As I recall, they're as good as the New Orleans oyster; they just didn't fix them the same way.

00:08:07

AE: Where did roasted oysters fall in your—in your categorization of oysters and liking oysters? Are you still a fan of roasted oysters and you like to seek them out from time to time?

00:08:20

DE: Oh sure, you know, yeah. I wouldn't want to go to Charleston without getting some, and we usually do. We have family there and as I said, they usually—that's one of the things they'll do. Like you have friends come to New Orleans, and we'll have a crawfish boil. But yeah, I'd want to get roasted oysters when I go—when I go to Charleston. I think every time I've gone to Charleston I've gone to Bowen's Island since then just to see it's still there and—and it's—it's hard to get people to want to go with you. **[Laughs]** It's not real plush, but it's a good meal, and it's fun. It's one of those ethnic things to do, you know, that you can't do anyplace else.

00:08:56

AE: And what about that? I mean like when people come to Oxford, they like to go to Taylor Grocery, and the experience of being there is so much a part of the meal that you eat. And can you maybe kind of elaborate on that kind of comparison with what Bowen's Island is?

00:09:08

DE: I think you're absolutely right. I think there may be people that go to Charleston and never even hear about Bowen's Island just because it's a bigger place than Oxford is. But yeah, I think especially people that—that know about eating and are interested in eating are going to want to try it and—and having gone once, if you come back to Charleston, you want to try it again. Charleston has this—has this image and it's a well earned image of being an elegant Southern city, and that it's survived the war and Holocaust and Yellow Fever epidemics and so forth, and so it does have this—this image of elegance, and so a lot of people go there to take in that image of elegance. But if they're going to eat, I think they take in—want to take in Bowen's Island.

00:09:53

AE: Uh-hmm. What did you think when they received the American Classic Award last year from the James Beard Foundation?

00:09:59

DE: I didn't even know they were open until I heard that, and I was so thrilled that—that happened, you know. It was kind of like Dottye [Bennett] getting her award for this crummy old steakhouse in New Orleans [Charlie's Steak House]. It's—that's great. I mean it's—it's a—a culinary original and something that should be honored—something that should be honored by historical people and—and food people, too.

00:10:21

AE: And then what about when Bowen's Island burned this fall in October?

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DE: I didn't know it was flammable. *[Laughs]* I didn't think there was anything there that could burn. I'm sorry to hear that but—but I didn't think it was going to take too much to put it back together because all it was—was a concrete block building. You just take the concrete blocks apart and put them back together and put another and another. I mean it was an open fire. They didn't have a whole lot—well I guess they had all their cooking equipment to do all the other meals and all the other dishes that they did but—but it didn't take—it didn't look like it was going to take much to put it back together. I was always surprised that the—that the Health Department didn't look on it, especially the—the bathroom facilities and maybe they have by now. I don't know. But it was pretty raunchy, if you had to use the ladies room.

00:11:13

AE: Were the facilities enclosed when you first started visiting or was it more of kind of an—an outhouse scenario?

00:11:18

DE: Oh no, it was an outhouse. It was a definite outhouse. Good—and they always tried to position it down-wind.

00:11:26

AE: [*Laughs*] Did you have any experience there when you visited, too—I've heard a lot about when it was high tide that you—you couldn't navigate the road out of there?

00:11:32

DE: That's—that was a problem, and that's what I meant at first when I said about the mud. Sometimes it was—it was hard—hard to get out; you really had to find a way—and it was the night too, you know, and nobody was there to help you, I don't recall. You just had to know what—what you were doing.

00:11:48

AE: Uh-hmm. Do you have any memories of Mrs. Bowen in the restaurant?

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DE: She was there but not very prominent. I really don't have much memory except for her being there. She was a little lady and—and but I don't remember much about her.

00:12:01

AE: How about the oyster cookers. Did you have much interaction with them while they were roasting your oysters?

00:12:06

DE: Yeah, they were fun to talk to. They'd sit down and talk. I mean all they had to do is do some shoveling. In between the shoveling they'd—they'd just hang out and talk to you and tell jokes and yeah, they were—they were characters, mostly black guys, sometimes toothless black guys, but—but part of the image.

00:12:25

AE: Do you remember some stories that stand out from a night eating there?

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DE: I think—well the first time Mr. Bowen told the story about his eyes about getting his eyes operated on we—*[Laughs]*—it was—we were just appalled and just looked at each other and said, “Well I guess that’s about it; we’ve had all we can eat.” *[Laughs]* But he told that story over and over again—usually late in the meal.

00:12:49

AE: *[Laughs]* And the—the physical place, since you said, if I remember correctly, the last time you were there is in the ‘80s, is that right?

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DE: Yes.

00:12:59

AE: The chairs and the—the pictures on the wall and things—just kind of the—the atmosphere of the environment, do you remember any of that that sticks out in your memory?

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DE: It was very basic. Very basic. The chairs were like these vinyl restaurant chairs that you’d see in a cheap barbecue place or something like that and they were—split and stuffing coming out. And they had a couple of easy chairs with the springs all broken and kind of bent and hard to

sit into. And I imagine just whatever furniture they could find sitting out on the—on the front lawn of somebody, you know, in the garbage pile they'd—they'd confiscate for their restaurant. I don't remember too much about the artwork. Maybe I did at one time, but I don't recall anything like that. It certainly wasn't anything other than just something to cover up a whole in the wall.

00:13:53

AE: Were there stacks of TVs there when you were first starting visiting?

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DE: I don't remember that. I don't remember that story, no.

00:13:59

AE: [*Laughs*] What did the rest of the island look like?

00:14:03

DE: Well it was—it was in the middle of the marsh and it was—it was beautiful. I mean the island—if you live around a marsh and you live there all the time, you understand how the marsh changes maybe four or five times a year, depending on the weather, depending on the temperature, depending on the change of the tides and—and the real Charlestonians can predict things coming from the marsh. And the marsh is beautiful. It's different colors, different you know, like ways like grain—wind blowing through the wheat and it's—it was very, very pretty and very picturesque and waterways running through it. The—it was not far from Folly Beach, which was—there were three beaches in—in Charleston: Folly Beach, Sullivan's Island and Mount Pleasant. It all had three; they all had beaches. Folly Beach was the oldest and, at the time, the tackiest but I think Hurricane Hugo pretty much did away with it, and so it's much

nicer and upscale condos and things like that now. When we lived in Charleston for a while, we lived in a small garage apartment, concrete block garage apartment and it was just the two of us. And so when we went back for this time and then we went to Bowen's Island, we went back to see if we could find it. It was after Hugo and we had no—no hopes of finding it and the island was just devastated. It was just devastated, but you know, that little concrete block apartment was still there so—. Concrete blocks hold up. And I guess that's why Bowen's Island is still there, too.

00:15:52

AE: Well are you going to be in Charleston for the [Southern Foodways Alliance] field trip this summer?

00:15:54

DE: I am. We're looking forward to it. Like I said, we have family there that we're looking forward to seeing, too, but yeah, we're looking forward to going back to Charleston.

00:16:03

AE: Well and what is—so you're a Southern Foodways Alliance member and—and avid eater and enjoyer of culinary arts and experiences. What—what do you think focusing on a place like Bowen's Island means in the bigger picture and—and why it's—it's worth talking about and visiting and—and celebrating?

00:16:25

DE: Well Southern Foodways—I always thought Southern Foodways was about chronicling the way people eat in the South and have always eaten in the South, historically, and into the future.

And certainly for—for a very important part of the South, the Charleston area, Low Country, this was the way people have eaten. People lived off oysters, and I'm sure they learned it from the Indians and from—from the Native Americans that were—were living in that area when they came in. They always had great relations with the Indians in Charleston because it was a pretty—I mean you couldn't plant things there at first and then it was—they had to rely on seafood and so they—they taught them all about that. And it wasn't that Europeans didn't eat oysters, they did, but I guess they learned a new way to eat them. But yeah, I think it's a very important part of what we're doing in Charleston is to chronicle the seafood—that kind of seafood like we did with the Gulf Coast last summer [as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance's field trip to Apalachicola, Florida].

00:17:26

AE: Do you have a favorite place to eat oysters, whether it's in South Carolina, Florida, or New Orleans?

00:17:32

DE: Oh yeah. My favorite place to eat oysters now is Drago's [in Metairie, Louisiana], and they have a wonderful dish called—called Charbroiled Oysters, and it's a wonderful restaurant anyway. Their food is—is excellent and they have—they have an innate ability—it's a family run place and they have an innate ability to make everybody that comes in think they're their best friend, which—which is great in any kind of business but especially in the restaurant business. Yeah, that's the best place. You can get—raw oysters are great there. They have their own oyster beds, which they can, you know, you can feel pretty comfortable that they're going to be safe. That's it.

00:18:09

AE: Do you see a lot of difference and if so, can you describe the difference between the oysters in New Orleans and Charleston and anywhere else that you've experienced them?

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DE: The oysters in New Orleans and—and we—we go down to the Gulf Shores, which is kind of in the Mobile/Pensacola region, so I would categorize that as pretty much the same. I'd say they're about the same, yeah. I think—I think in New Orleans we make better oyster cocktail sauce but other than that [*Laughs*]*—that's a very chauvinistic thing to say but hey, I'm from New Orleans. But otherwise, yeah, I think they're—they're pretty much the same—nice, full cold, salty.*

00:18:54

AE: Do you have a memory of the—the cocktail sauce at Bowen's Island? Because it is very different from a lot that I've personally experienced.

00:19:01

DE: No, I don't but it's not anything like—like we would make in New Orleans. It's watery-er and—and—but good, but good.

00:19:09

AE: Well is there something that I haven't asked you that you'd like to make sure to share about your experiences with Bowen's Island?

00:19:16

DE: No, I can't think of—I've pretty much got—said the things I was going to say—that I was thinking that I wanted to say. I'm really looking forward to going back and going with a bunch of foodies this summer. It will be fun. It will be fun.

00:19:32

AE: It will be a good experience, for sure. Well thank you so much, Duke, for taking time out of the Conference [Oxford Conference for the Book] to visit with me. I appreciate it.

00:19:37

DE: I hope I gave you some good information.

[End Duke Eversmeyer 2 Interview]