CHRIS WAY
DAT’L DO-IT HOT SAUCE

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Anna Hamilton: This is Anna Hamilton for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Friday, July 19, 2013 and it’s about 10:30. And I’m sitting with Chris Way in his house in downtown St. Augustine right across from The Fort. Would you tell me who you are and what you do please?

Chris Way: Yes; my name’s Chris Way. I’m primarily in the restaurant business—my original background, but I’m more of an entrepreneur and you know started several different companies, one of which was the Dat’il Do-It-Hot Sauce that Anna’s interviewing me about.

AH: And would you also just tell me your birthday for the record?

CW: October 5, 1956. I’m 56 years old.

AH: Happy birthday.

CW: Thank you.

AH: And so would you tell me how you got started with Dat’il Do-It?

CW: Well when I opened up Barnacle Bill’s in 1981 I made a Datil pepper hot sauce, which was pretty common among the locals here in St. Augustine. Now the Datil pepper is not very well-known outside of here but for you know the last couple hundred years the locals here have—have kind of made it a—a tradition. But I’ve started making a Datil pepper sauce to serve on my tables at Barnacle Bill’s when I started it in 1981. And after about four or five months of being open I noticed that the bottles of hot sauce were being stolen off the table. It didn’t have a label; it you know it was just a sauce that I created to serve with fried shrimp. And then the bottle started disappearing and it just kind of gave me the idea of well, you know maybe if given the opportunity to buy it they might not steal it.

So that kind of launched me into the commercial side of—of bottling a Datil pepper hot sauce. And I think and I’m not—not for certain but I’m—I’m pretty sure that I was the first person in the history of the Datil pepper to—to try and launch it on a—a commercial basis. I knew nothing—I mean zero about packaging, marketing, and getting it in the grocery stores—that type of thing. I mean I knew nothing. And so I kind of learned by the seat of my pants. I started making it and bottling it in the restaurant on Sundays. I was closed on Sundays and so I bottled it there by hand and then served it on the table and sold it at the cash register.
And at the time a customer of mine was the Vice President of Winn Dixie and he told me that if I you know had it properly packaged that he would help me get it into his grocery stores and the Jacksonville market. So you know of course I—I went after that and that’s what kind of launched me into the, you know trying to get it into the grocery business.

AH: Now what was your—can you talk about your recipe a little bit for the Datil pepper sauce?

CW: Well, [Laughs] yeah it’s—it’s—it is interesting. You know when you make it on a small scale it’s—it’s pretty, pretty simple. But as I was making larger and larger batches then you know getting the Datil peppers, handling them properly—started to get a little bit tricky. And we had a—a couple of instances where some of my staff didn’t take directions from me very well and you know the Datil pepper as long as you handle it and it hasn’t been busted, the—the pod hasn’t been ruptured, they’re—they’re benign. They’re—they’re not going to hurt you. But once that pod is busted the capsicum [note: capsaicin] in the—in the pepper is—can be really, really irritating. And you know when you breathe it, get it on your fingers, wipe your eye, I mean it—it’s really lethal. And it’s not just—it’s not just the Datil pepper but any—any pepper that—that’s you know on the heat scale that—that gets up there it’s common in all the peppers but it was—. You know the Datil pepper even though as a kid was more used for its potency to inflict damage than it was to make food taste good, just to kind of get off-topic a little bit.

When we were kids we all had paper routes here in downtown and Davis Shores and stuff and if we had a particular dog that would chase us or you know cause us problems, we would you know—we’d have Datil peppers and mash it into the vinegar and just get the vinegar really hot and we’d—the dog would come chasing us—after us and a couple of squirts of that Datil pepper vinegar the next time we rode by the house the dog would run on the porch, so—. We—we used it that way. Some other pranks that we’ve pulled and—and with the Datil pepper is you—you mash it and—and get it into a really low-grade amount of vinegar so the potency of the heat is really—is really a—really, really hot. And then we would go out into the parking lot wherever all the kids left their bicycles and we’d spray it on their handle grips, on the seats, their bike seats, anywhere that their skin might come in contact with the pepper. And then their sweat would reanimate and then they—their hands would burn and their—you know butt would burn. Their eyes would burn. So I mean it was a lot of pranks pulled with it, but anyway I kind of got off-topic, but—.

When I first started with the peppers I started having to have a large amount of peppers, so it became difficult for me to find somebody that was growing them in any kind of a—any kind of a capacity to—to keep up, so I had to buy this—this big vertical grinder to help me grind these peppers up and we’d wear kind of like a hazmat suit with gloves and goggles and—and then in the kitchen, you know when you’re rinsing it out and cleaning it the fumes, you know were just unbearable, so it became a little bit of a problem handling that quantity of Datil peppers.
I had an employee of mine for some reason because he was Minorcan and I told him, you know make sure you wear your gloves, and we would use those rubber latex gloves and tape them up by the elbow and—I mean really be careful with them, and for some reason he goes, ‘oh I’m Minorcan; my family has been around these Datil peppers and everything.’ And I said ‘just wear the gloves. I’m—just trust me.’ ‘Oh I don’t need that stuff.’

So I came back into the restaurant and he was unloading this big vertical chopper. And he was just grabbing handfuls of ground-up Datil peppers and within 20 minutes his hands and arms had swollen up and looked like just one big blister like it was about to pop and I had to take him to the Emergency Room. For some reason he thought because he was Minorcan that it wouldn’t [Laughs]—wouldn’t affect him. But he learned a lesson the hard way.

But anyway when—like I said I was making it in the restaurant on my own and then as it got bigger and I started you know getting larger and larger orders—now keep in mind, we’re still not talking about a lot. I mean if somebody you know—if Winn Dixie had ordered 50 cases I mean that’s—that’s a full day’s work. And so then from there I decided that I needed to find somebody to bottle the product for me. And that’s when it really turned into a big learning curve because packaging something at home using ingredients that you bought at the store like ketchup and you know vinegar and when you do it on a larger scale, the—usually the bottling companies make their own ingredients, make their own vinegar and make their own ketchup and make their own. So to try and get the flavor profile, you know it became trickier.

So I found a bottler in Atlanta and he started bottling it for me. And as I got bigger and bigger I started having to get a larger manufacturer and I ultimately ended up with a bottling company in Palmetto, Florida called Palmetto Canning. And they do a lot of contract work for Publix and Goya and you know a lot of private—he does a lot of private label products. And that’s where I ultimately left it and it’s—. But now Dat’il Do It is being manufactured in St. Augustine at the Dat’il Do It Plant. There is a contract bottler there that owns the building and now he manufactures the Datil pepper sauce for—for Dat’il Do It. But I’m no longer—I sold the company about six years ago, but you know from—from the ground up, you know taking it—the Datil pepper product from a local commodity to you know to a national distribution I believe I was the first person to do that.

AH: Now at the height of like the Dat’il Do It production when you were still involved how many Datil peppers would you go through?

CW: Well that brings up [Laughs] another facet to the story. I had some friends Dan and Richard Chellemi who are still very close friends of mine and you got to understand that getting up to speed back then, I was still you know in my early 20s and without any real experience in any kind of the stuff, so it was kind of like the Keystone Cops, you know and I’m sitting around you know having a couple of beers with Richard and Dan Chellemi. And Dan’s background is in horticulture and gosh I’m not real sure Anna what the—but he worked for the Department of
Agriculture in the you know the—the chemical structure of pepper or plants and you know getting down to the—the real biology of this stuff. But so they—he had kind of a flair for growing things. So you know just sitting around drinking beer, I said you know you guys grow Datil peppers for me and you know I’ll—I’ll buy all you grow which was kind of a statement I probably shouldn’t have made. But you know at the time you know finding Datil peppers was tricky. I mean everybody might have a plan or two but you know when I started needing you know hundreds of pounds of Datil peppers with no market to go and get them you know there is nobody growing them commercial. There hadn't been a demand for them. So I kind of created the demand and then over a couple of beers with some friends we tried to figure out how to meet the demand. And so Dan and Richard started growing Datil peppers.

So the first crop you know they’d bring me a couple of bushels and I’m going ‘all right.’ And you know I said okay now I can—now I’m in pretty good shape. And then the next day they brought me a couple more bushels. [Laughs] And then the next day a couple more bushels and I was like whoa, whoa, whoa. Now supply completely overwhelmed demand, so that kind of threw a monkey wrench into the thing because now they’re stuck with all these Datil peppers. I don’t know what do to with them. My freezer is full of them. And I’m trying to buy them but I mean I’m—I’m hoarding the market and now I’m trying to figure out you know maybe I can find somebody that wants to buy Datil peppers. So now I’m trying to sell Datil peppers while I’m trying to make the hot sauce. I mean it was a Keystone Cops—

So when we got through that hurdle, and Dat’l Do It started to get a little bit of a foothold there’s a whole other story, Anna, to the problems in getting a product onto the grocery shelves. I mean it’s a completely different animal, I mean if you decide you want me to go into that a little bit I will but sticking just to the Datil pepper side of it—. We—I built a small warehouse out at [State Road] 16 and [Interstate] 95 because I had to move the—the—the operation out of the restaurant and it started to become its own you know kind of its own business. So I built a warehouse and I was awful optimistic in the size, you know so all of the sudden now I have this big warehouse and you know but I still don’t have the—the sales to—you know I could never just get it right. So all of the sudden I got this huge warehouse that I could have probably played tennis in while I’m trying to get the—the thing going.

So at the time when I built the warehouse I also decided to build my own farm. So now I—now I’ve got into the farming business. So I went from opening a restaurant and then less than a year after I had been opened, I stumble into this thing and like I said it was just a three-ring circus. So I built a warehouse and a farm and on this farm I built it to—it’s—it wasn’t hydroponics but it was like a drip irrigation system where I’d put the nutrients and blend it in the water and—and I had a friend of mine, Rick McDermott that kind of spearheaded setting up the farm. But I built the farm and built all these shelves so the Datil peppers would be off the ground because I was pretty sure I was going to have to pick them and I didn’t want to have to get on my hands and knees and—and pick Datil peppers.

So we built them on these stands and drip irrigation fed them and I might have some photos of this if you ever wanted pictures of it, but—so our first crop was just phenomenal and
we had probably I’m guessing maybe 400 Datil pepper plants. And the way we fed them in drip irrigation it was just I mean the—the plants were just amazing. The peppers were as big as your thumb and—and so then I was looking at all these Datil peppers and I’m going, ‘oh my god.’ Who is going to pick these damn things? So then I went from frying shrimp to making Datil pepper sauce to growing the Datil peppers, now I’m a farmer. And so I make a deal with the Association for Retarded Citizens which had their—their facility very close to my farm. So [laughs] we would pay them; they would come to my farm and pick the Datil peppers. So now I’ve got farming staff picking Datil peppers and I’m back to square one again with what am I going to do with all these Datil peppers? So then I said well, I’ll come up with other products to sell. So that launched me into the Dat’l Do It Mustard, Devil Drops, Hellish Relish. I mean I was just trying to come up with something but now I had all these new products and didn’t know how to get them into the grocery store.

So like I said the whole grocery side of it is—is a completely different story but it’s—it’s fascinating of how that grocery business runs. If—and do you want me to tell you—some about this? And I found out in the grocery business that it’s—it’s ultimately up to the consumer as to whether or not a product remains on a grocery shelf, I mean for obvious reasons. But getting your product onto the grocery shelf isn't a matter—I mean it almost has nothing to do with the quality of the product. I mean I would naively go and make presentations to distributors or grocery stores and I would boil shrimp and I’d bring the Datil pepper sauce and I would want them to try it and I was going to lay everything out and just show them just how wonderful my products were. And they had really almost no interest in it in tasting it.

And so then I kind of really realized that—that it’s a numbers’ game and it’s all about the money. They would ask you how much money do you have for marketing? We would have to pay a sliding fee to get on the grocery store and pay each store so much and give them free cases to put into the shelves and they had little interest in whether or not the product was any good. It was almost like, ‘pay us; you get it on the grocery store. You go and market it and hope that the customer takes it and takes it home and they open it up and like it.’ So I learned a hard lesson there and it’s very, very expensive launching a product. And I think it gets harder and harder you know every year. But it was—it was interesting, you know going through the learning curve but I grew really cynical about how that—how that industry works. And I know enough about the grocery business now that if I had the money I mean I could go out into the marsh and fill a jar up with marsh mud and put a label on it and I guarantee it I can get it on the grocery shelves in Publix and not have one person throughout the supply chain stick their finger in it and go, ‘this is mud.’ They’ll let the consumer decide that; you know what I mean. They don’t—they don’t—you know when you—you think you’re going to a supplier that’s going to supply to grocery stores and say hey I got a really great barbecue sauce. Well okay; well let me taste it first and let’s just see if we’re even in the game. That—it’s irrelevant. They—if you’ve got the money then you put it on the shelf and let the customer decide whether they—they buy it or not. That’s why it’s so critical to have the marketing. And that’s the thing that has hindered—or hindered me in really exposing the Datil pepper. You know I had Dat’l Do It in grocery stores throughout the
Southeast and you know all over the country but I never you know I never really—I never really hit a homer with it where it became a household word.

I mean you look at the stuff now that—that makes it big in the grocery store and I mean there’s—there is some element of luck to it I suppose, but you know you take products like I mean for God’s sakes a Twinkie. I mean I can't think of the worst possible thing you could ever put in your mouth but everybody knows what a Twinkie is. So I just never really got the ball rolling and where the Datil pepper became you know some phenomenon like—well the habanero probably to a greater extent. You know I think that’s a—a much widely known pepper where when the Datil pepper—when I started Dat’l Do It there—there really wasn’t a single pepper that kind of ruled the world. It was you know Tabasco but there was no individual pepper. I mean the jalapeno was probably the most known pepper but the Datil pepper just never—. You know it was partially my fault. I don’t think I had the funds to—to market it properly. But it just—it’s just one of those things that I just thought that had it taken off, the Datil pepper would have been a lot widely known which could have been of huge commercial success, but I just don’t think that I was ever able really to—to make that happen.

AH: Now where—what was like the farthest reaching place that you were able to put Dat’l Do It?

CW: Well we had—as far as a structured chain grocery store, I had it up and down the eastern seaboard, you know Winn Dixie, Publix, but where it had the—the biggest impact was in the Southeast. You know through all the Jacksonville markets, Georgia, Alabama, and when I went through a distributor I didn’t necessarily know every store that my product was in because once the—the distributor gets a hold of it, now they use their marketing efforts and try and get the products that they represent in different stores but I had a—I had a pretty good presence. And I still do.

I know Publix here [in St. Augustine] sells a lot of our products there. But I never—I never really had just blanket coverage like—like some of the other products. I mean like you take for instance like Paul Newman’s line of food. I mean he teams up with—with a manufacturer. They come up with a bunch of salad dressings and barbecue sauces and they put Paul Newman’s face on it—boom. You know it—off it goes.

Now if it’s the—if the product is not any good it may not survive, but it—it makes that initial push to get it—to get it taken off the shelves. There was a—there was a story just to kind of put it in perspective that really caused me some—some anguish—was about four years after I started Dat’l Do It and was making very small inroads at the time, the hot sauce craze really got big. Early ‘80s and early—I mean mid-‘80s to the mid-‘90s you know the hot sauce craze was just as big as it’s ever been. And it—and it’s waned now but at the height of this time there was a product out of Jacksonville that—that started hitting the airways and it was called Poncho and Lefty’s Salsa. And I started hearing commercials on the radio every day, you know on Rock 105
and they had Lex and Terry the famous DJs in Jacksonville; you remember them? And they were—
I mean it was just this huge push on marketing for Poncho and Lefty’s. And they had it in all
the grocery stores and there were commercials being run on the radio and on TV and they were
doing celebrity, you know, events where they would have Poncho and Lefty’s was sponsoring
you know this foot race or whatever.

And so out of nowhere comes Poncho and Lefty’s and I was just—I was devastated. You
know, I said, ‘dang how did they’—you know I thought they were just rolling in the dough and
their product as I remember had to be refrigerated. So getting a refrigerated product is a lot more
expensive in the grocery stores than a non-refrigerated because of just the size of real estate.
There is not much refrigerated space, so—. All of the sudden, you know I feel like I’m being
bulldozed by this Poncho and Lefty’s Hot Sauce or Salsa, excuse me.

So the ads were just nonstop for about five—four or five months and started to taper off
and then within a year they were gone. And that was another lesson that I learned that you know,
you got to have the marketing and I think what this company did and I don’t know for sure and I
don’t mean them any ill will; I don’t know anything really about the company—but I think what
happened was in that hot sauce craze they came up with a salsa and they got involved with some
people that knew the—the ins and outs of getting a product on the shelf and they got some
investors and they, you know, raised—I’m just making numbers up but you know maybe they
raised half a million dollars. And they make the product; they get it in some of the Publix(es) in
this region and then they did what you know really is—you have to do is just market, market,
market and advertise. And what happened was I think they ran out of advertising money before
they could establish themselves and then you know within a year they had fizzled out and it was
gone. You know no more Lex and Terry and no more plugs on the radio and it—it just went
away. And so you know that kind of gives you an insight into you know what’s involved and
how expensive it can get.

I’ve had a lot of people come to me over the years and they still do and they start out with
man I got a great hot sauce or I got a great barbecue sauce and—or beef jerky. I had a guy who
was going to do Datil pepper beef jerky and you know came and talked to me about it and I gave
him all the pitfalls and you know the—the you know the five-dollar story about what’s involved
and there’s still companies. You know there’s—there’s a—there’s a lot of Datil pepper companies
out there now that are trying to make it. I don’t remember the names of all of them, but there
seems to be a couple that are—that are doing pretty good. But it’s funny when I see them starting
out the exact same way I did [Laughs] and I’m like these guys have no idea what they’re in for,
you know.

You see them at the little you know the Farmers’ Markets and stuff and I’ve had a couple
of companies. There was one—one company that when I was about—ah it was probably 10
years ago and Dat’l Do It was becoming kind of a household name around the area and stuff. But
there was a company that came out and it was called Datil-Dew—D-e-w, which I thought was
kind of lame and I suppose I could have, you know, called my attorney and stopped them but I
just figured let—let them learn this on their own [Laughs] but there was companies Datil Dew
and Datil—Dat’l-Did-It and you know it was just all kinds of takes on—on my name, Dat’l Do It.

But the—I’m losing my train of thought there for a second, but—anyway just irrelevant about the Datil pepper itself, just getting any products to the grocery store is just—is just a big nightmare. But I guess that’s it.

**AH:** Well why do you think your company was so successful even though it was you know hard but—?

**CW:** Well you know I—I guess the level of success is—is measured a little bit differently. I was real—real proud of the company. We have—we’ve got some really nice products. We’ve got some good distribution but you know it was—it was gratifying to be able to go into the grocery stores and go, ‘hey I did that.’ You know, ‘that’s—that’s my product on the shelf.’ And a funny story; I was in Publix one time and I’m in the—you know in the sauce section and there is this woman and she’s getting two or three bottles of Dat’l Do It off the shelf and putting it into her cart. And she got some mustard. She had like—she bought like eight or nine bottles, you know. And so I just happened to be in the grocery store when she did it and I said, ‘hey is that Dat’l Do It stuff good?’ She goes, ‘oh yeah it’s very good.’ I said, ‘well I’m the owner of the company. That’s my product you’re buying.’ She goes, ‘oh no; you’re not.’ I said, ‘no; I’m—really I am.’ She goes, ‘no; you’re not. I know the owner of Dat’l Do It. He went to school with my sons.’ I said, ‘really? What’s your sons’ names?’ And she told me and I didn’t recognize any of the names. [Laughs] And I told her, I said, ‘no; I’m—this is my company.’ ‘No; I know the guy.’ She was adamant that I was not him and you know I told her my name and she goes, ‘no; that’s not who owns Dat’l Do It’ and she turns around and walks off.

So it was—you know that was—that was kind of strange but you know I guess the thing that I enjoyed most about it was that I was able to with you know almost no knowledge about the industry to be able to you know to get it on the shelves and—and you know it’s still a going concern today. I’m not involved in the company anymore but what—what happened with Dat’l Do It as a company is they’ve geared more now to doing gift sets and that—that—when we started really popping it in the—and started to become a—a really a successful company was when we kind of shifted gears and started doing gift sets for the holidays. And it’s still the majority of the business for Dat’l Do It now is still doing holiday gift sets. And we’ll do hot sauce gift sets, barbecue; Ruth Anne Causey who owns the company now came to work for me in the early—in the mid-’80s when I really started you know becoming a going concern and she worked with me and was just instrumental in the success of Dat’l Do It. And then when I was ready to—to get out of the hot sauce business and sold her the company she’s really—she’s really taken it to the next level. But that business is primarily doing holiday gift sets at—for Walmart and Target. And—and that’s a whole other can of worms. If—if Ruth Anne wasn’t still in the business, and we laugh about it now, but whenever she gets out the—she and I are going to
write a book on what it’s like dealing with Walmart and Target and some of those companies because I—I mean I’ve got stories that will blow your mind of dealing with them.

But anyway I know we’re getting kind of a little bit off-track but on the Datil pepper side. When I first started it and was trying to learn about the Datil pepper I’m doing the same thing that you were doing and I was trying to find out okay what’s—where did this pepper come from? And the—the story around town was that the Minorcans brought the pepper here when they settled and you know they came from Minorca. So with very little research I found right away that you know nobody has ever heard of the Datil pepper in Minorca. I think it’s probably pretty similar to nobody in Australia has probably ever heard of a blooming onion. You know what I mean?

You know [Laughs] people in Australia are going what’s the—what the hell is a blooming onion? So that was a big part of it and what research I could find on it was in all likelihood that the Datil pepper made its way here through the Central America and the traders and stuff that were coming you know through the Caribbean and into Florida would bring these you know peppers with them. And then over you know hundreds of years of growing in a particular environment, and I don’t know much on the scientific side nor do I claim to, but it kind of developed its own characteristics and you know the other rumor or the other legend was that it wouldn’t grow anywhere else. It was the soil in St. Augustine and—and that’s all just hooey. I would never—I would never do that publicly as far as marketing. I would say yeah; it’s the only place in the whole world it’ll grow. It can't grow anywhere and it doesn’t taste right if it doesn’t grow here. So if you can create that kind of a—a buzz and legend it’s—it would be a good thing. But you know the Datil pepper will you know grow anywhere that other peppers will grow. I imagine they might have some different characteristics but I mean it’s still—the Datil pepper is not you know take it out of St. John’s County and it’ll die on the vine you know because we—I’ve had people growing Datil peppers you know as far away as Ohio and people used to send me pictures. I had a product—I had a product that I developed when I was doing Dat’l Do It and the—the bad part about all this had I had access—if they had the internet and the ability to sell online when I started Dat’l Do It, I think I would have had a much greater chance of success because the internet gives you almost instant access to anything and anybody.

But I came out with a product called Test Tube Babies. And I would dry the Datil pepper seeds and then I’d put it in a little test tube and put a label on it and it showed a Datil pepper in diapers you know crying. And so that—that was probably the single biggest thing that’s probably ever been done to the Datil pepper and to get people that would like the hot sauce, they could buy the seeds. So I had people sending me pictures from you know all over the country where they said you know I bought your seeds and look at my Datil pepper plants. And had the internet been in play then it could have been, you know with the kind of—it could have really been viral. You could have you know—show me your Datil pepper plants and I’d post them online and buy your hot sauce here. I think—I think had I started Dat’l Do It with access to the internet I would have been on a much even playing field than trying to get a product into the grocery stores, you know in a conventional way because it takes a lot of money.
AH: That’s really interesting; yeah, to think about that exposure that you could have—.

CW: Oh let me—jar one—.

AH: Really?

CW: Yes and it’s just dried out. The—the peppers have eaten the lid off it. That’s my first jar of Dat’l Do It right there.

AH: Oh my gosh I might have to take a picture of that here in a second.

CW: You can take a picture of it. I also had a—I had a Test Tube Baby here somewhere.

AH: I had never heard of the Test Tube Baby.

CW: Yeah; well this is one of the—that was a pepper patch growing kit. Oh you know what maybe it’s in there; let me see. Yeah; we—we made this. We made this growing kit. God I had forgotten all about this. And I bought different kinds of—

AH: Oh my gosh.

CW: —peppers. And you could buy from me this little Datil pepper and you know I had Datil peppers and then some other different peppers and it had the little plug you know and you stick the seed in and germinate it. And this was going to be a product that we were trying to sell into into Walmart and you know, stuff for the holidays—jalapeno. Well actually when I did this pepper kit, I—I wasn’t sure that I was going to be able to get enough Datil pepper seeds if Walmart said yeah, I need a million of these. And then I had Datil peppers on it and I wouldn’t be able to get enough seeds. So I didn’t—I didn’t even have the—the Datil pepper in there because I couldn’t get the seeds.

AH: That is something.

CW: Yeah; oh and this is a little something when I had it in Japan. That’s a whole other story. You want to hear that one?
AH: Yeah; absolutely.

CW: Okay. There is the Dat’l Do It Test Tube Baby. Isn’t that crazy?

AH: [Laughs] That is fantastic.

[PORTION REDACTED]

AH: Well how did you—what did you talk about deciding on the name Dat’l Do It?

CW: Yeah; that’s funny you mentioned that. I was in the restaurant; like I said I was making it in the restaurant and I had only been open about a year. And I opened Barnacle Bills when I was 23 I believe and I was the oldest person working there other than my sister. She was a waitress there for a while but—you know when I opened up this restaurant and we were busy right off the bat, I mean Barnacle Bills was a big success from day one and you know the oldest person there was me. Everybody else was you know 16, 17 years old you know and I’m running a—a restaurant that I had no idea it was going to go over like it did. But anyway as far as coming up with the name for the Datil pepper—my hot sauce company I had banged around you know just in my head and I knew I wanted to use the word Datil somewhere. And then my sister just cavalierly said ‘Dat’l Do It.’ I went ‘that’s it; over,’ I mean in just five seconds when she said that—‘Dat’l Do It,’ I went, ‘done.’ I said that’s it. That’s the name of the company.

So I had an artist you know do a—I wanted the Dat’l Do It logo to kind of have an old world parchment type and you can see it on the type on—when you look at the boxes and stuff but—and that was it. You know Dat’l Do It—that was the name of the company. And I—I knew that—I didn’t think—consider anything else; that was it Dat’l Do It. That’s how the name came about. My sister did it. She had to take—I could take credit for it but she came up with it.

And then the other products, the Test Tube Baby and Hellish Relish and Minorcan Mustard—and then after I kind of got it going there was several other people in town that—that you know launched a—a hot sauce product. And but as I said earlier, if the internet was available, I think it would have been a completely different—different game. But I had a lot of fun you know trying to get this thing going. We’d go to food shows and you know demo the stuff and I—I had a Harley Davidson painted up with Datil peppers and it was a Dat’l Do It Harley Davidson and for—for not having any—any real money to—to market it I think you know between Ruth Anne and I we came up with some—some really clever ways to—to do it.

I tell you the thing that launched Dat’l Do It into a national concern, a company was on the QVC; you know the QVC channel? Well they were doing a—they were doing an event called
the Fifty and Fifty Tour and they were going into each state and finding the fifty best products that the state produces. And they had like a trade show where you would go and set up a booth and show your product and then the QVC people would come around and look and see if there was anything they wanted. And it didn’t have to be—it didn’t have to be food but just anything from Florida. I mean there were people there with, you know, fishing rods and you know just a—any product from Florida that was exclusive to Florida could be considered.

So I went down to Orlando and I set up the Dat’l Do It booth and I had a lot of my graphic stuff. My good friend and artist Bo Sterk, do you know Bo? I think you’d recognize some of his work, but anyway Bo did a lot of the artwork for me for Dat’l Do It. And I wanted it to be really eye-catching and—and fun and you know I—I thought that was really the only marketing ploy I had. So we designed a Dat’l Do It gift set and I think I have it here somewhere. We designed a Dat’l Do It gift set that had five of my products in it and—anyway I’ll finish this—had five of my products in it and we packaged it up and I took it down to the QVC trade show and before they left they said you’re in. You know you’re—we definitely want your product in there. So then they said—I said well how many do you want? And he said well I believe the number was—well you need to make 7,000 of them. So I’m like okay. So we manufactured 7,000 cases and then I actually went onto QVC live on the TV program and so I had some Datil pepper plants there and they had the host, you know, kind of went over what was going to be said, but the—the idea was they introduced a product and you can call up and buy it right then and there. And so I get up there and I start talking about the Datil pepper and—and you know where it came from and the hot sauce, you know the whole dog and pony show and they sold all 7,000 gift sets in less than three minutes.

So they say well thank you very much Chris; you know and it was like it was just—it was over you know and then I walked off the set. And one of the people there said, ‘yeah; they’re—they’re gone. They’re sold out.’ So I left there going, ‘okay [Laughs];’ you know I said, ‘all right, wait a minute. Wait a minute; we got to rethink some things you know.’ So that’s what—that’s what launched Dat’l Do It into the direction of the gift sets. So now we came out with the same gift set and then we went to see Walmart and we went to see K-Mart and said, you know, ‘we just were on the QVC. We sold 7,000 of these things in three minutes.’ And it kind of gave us a little bit of clout, and not clout to, you know, make them take it but you know at least for them to consider it. So that’s how we got started into the business with Walmart. And then Walmart and K-Mart bought—I don’t remember the amount but now we got into the—you know we got into the, you know 30,000 and 40,000 units and—and so that’s kind of where Dat’l Do It is right now. But that was probably the biggest event was, ‘holy crap, I just sold more in three minutes.’ And so then I realized man the power of you know the national television or getting you know—getting something like that done, but that was kind of really what launched Dat’l Do It into what it is now is primarily a gift set business.

AH: So it’s still in Walmart and K-Mart and—?
**CW:** Yeah; Ruth Anne and—and Gina both of those girls worked for me prior to me selling the company and now—now Gina and Ruth Anne—and it’s funny. If—it’s really not so much a hot sauce company, they still call it Dat’l Do It, but it’s—it’s almost like Hershey selling, you know, cars. It’s just the—the name is there but we—it’s just kind of transferred or transformed into a holiday gift set. They do coffees and teas and—and anything.

[PORTION REDACTED]

So but Dat’l Do It still does—you know they always have—they’re always presenting hot sauce kits and—and that hot sauce growing kit was something that we presented to Walmart and they didn’t take it and why I—I thought for sure that was a no-brainer. They were going to take this thing. You know but they didn’t. I don’t know; it’s strange.

**AH:** Now you mentioned that Dat’l Do It reached Japan?

**CW:** Oh god; that’s a whole other story, yes. [Laughs] Yeah; in the mid-‘80s I guess, maybe late ‘80s, early ‘90s—I don’t even remember anymore—but the—a guy approached me, a Japanese gentleman from—he was living in St. Pete and he liked my hot sauce. And that’s when the hot sauce craze was really big. So he was looking for products to bring to Japan. And so he wanted to export Dat’l Do It to Japan. So I said, ‘oh okay; great.’ And you know I gave him a price. And he was going to have to be the middle man. You know I wasn’t going to you know start negotiating with grocery stores in Japan. He goes, ‘no, no, no; I’ll—I’ll do all that.’ His name was Koto [Matzamoto]. So Koto starts trying to put this together and now I had to make labels in Japanese. And they have a whole different set of rules and regulations and the Japanese are so picky and so meticulous that it’s—I mean it’s bizarre. And during the course of trying to get the product ready to ship and you know for them to actually purchase some, the stuff, the hoops I had to jump through you know was just—I was almost—in the back of my mind going, ‘I don’t—I don’t know if I want to pursue this, you know.’

And he was no, no, no; we’ve got to keep going you know. So anyway I shipped my first shipment over there and then he calls me about you know two weeks later when the product arrived there. ‘Oh big—we got a big problem, big problem.’ ‘What Koto; what?’ ‘The—the labels are all damaged and they won't put it on the shelves’ and so I’m thinking ‘okay, like the labels are tore off’ or you know. I’m going ‘what—what do you mean Koto; what happened?’ ‘Oh I’m going to send you pictures.’ And this was before the internet, too okay. So this is all like weeks—you know weeks to get all this stuff done in a matter of minutes. And he sends me these pictures of the label—of a jar and I’m going ‘well what Koto? I don’t—I don’t see anything.’ He goes ‘well I’ve got some product they’re Fed-Ex(ing) back.’ So they Fed-Ex(ed) a case back and Koto drives up from St. Pete and he’s showing it to me and on the corner of one label there might be some of the ink rubbed off or something. I mean you couldn’t even—‘are you kidding me, Koto?’ ‘No, no, no; they will not put this on the shelf.’ I’m like—so what we found out was happening is when the product was going overseas you know on the ship any vibration or...
whatever the jars that’s inside move—or in the truck or something, something that no one in America would even notice to them was a catastrophe.

So I don’t even remember how we resolved all that but anyway we—we shipped product over there and then he wanted me to come to Japan to be on TV. And I have tapes of this somewhere. I’ve got tapes of all these appearances I made. I don’t know if you ever want them I’m going to have to dig them out but I’ve got boxes of beta tape from the news reels and stuff. Oh god; did you ever see the movie *Lost in Translation*? You did, with Bill Murray? That’s what it’s like. So I—I go over there and I take Jonathan Greenlaw who is a good friend of mine and he was also my bottler. So Jonathan gets involved because you know now we’re talking about you know packaging stuff that you know we’re going to be shipping to Japan, so we started thinking ‘oh wow.’ This could be really big you know. So we go to Japan and the next day—we land in Tokyo in the morning or whatever and I don’t exactly remember but the next day I’m in my coat and tie and we go to the studio. So I think I’m going to get in there and we’re going to have a little talk and what’s going to happen, you know. So I get there and he—and they tell me ‘in 10 minutes you’re going to be on.’ ‘I’m going okay; what—what do I do?’ ‘You just go out there and be excited.’ ‘Be excited;’ that’s what they kept telling me. I mean you did see the movie, right?

Remember when he was doing the scotch commercials, ‘no, happy; oh no, look’—this you know, so they’re all coaching me. They said ‘you go out there; be happy and excited. You’re excited. You love your pepper. You love your’—you know. [Laughs] And Jonathan is sitting there and just laughing. You know so all of the sudden come on and so I run out on stage and never knowing who was going to be out there and who I was going to be talking to and they had a little table with my hot sauce set up there. And in Japan they have talk shows and game shows and stuff that are so bizarre and they have these little studios that are you know one after another just like—it was so weird. So anyway I get out there and they have a little panel set up like three judges sitting at a table, three Japanese people, some sort of celebrities over there, and then the host of the show and I just start talking about the Datil pepper and in the meantime these three people in the—this table were going [Gestures], you know tasting it and oh, this—and I’m not making fun of it, but you know all I hear—‘oh nice;’ [Gestures] and they’re just like tasting and—and then the three judges look to the host and they start talking in Japanese, you know oh yeah —. So they’re probably going ‘oh; this sauce—very good, very good.’

Anyway so this—and like a minute it’s over; all ‘thank you, thank you, thank you’ and they kind of lead me off stage and I just left the stage and I was like [Laughs] talking to my friend Jonathan and I was like, ‘what the—was that about?’ [Laughs] It was—it was the strangest thing I’ve ever—I’ve ever done in my life. I didn’t know what they were saying. I didn’t know what they were talking about but they had a studio audience that was like there in the stands. So after that we’re still hanging around there and I started going to all these other little studios. And there was a game show there. They have a game show—this is how bizarre it is over there. They have a game show where you get into the hot tub. They have like five contestants and you get into the hot tub and they keep bringing the temperature up until the last person left in the hot tub wins. And [Laughs] you know what they would win? They would get
five minutes to talk about anything they wanted on TV and most of them talked about how much they liked their job and their boss and oh, ‘I work for so and so. Very good company;’ I mean that’s what they would win.

The—there was another—there was another booth, another studio setup and they had these like big dominoes stacked up, big ones like monster-sized like an obstacle course where they would have to like run across the top of the dominoes and get to the other side before it fell. And if they fell they’d fall you know 10—15 feet into a—you know bales of cotton or something. It’s just—and all the game shows and all the talk shows had like a panel of judges like they were going to verify that, you know, he was funny or the food was good or the—the dancing was good. They would just like—they’d all talk amongst each other and they’d ‘oh, yeah, very good; very good.’ So that everybody was looking to these judges for affirmation that whatever they were watching was good. It was the strangest thing.

And then when that movie came out what was the name of it—I just—with Bill Murray?

AH: *Lost in Translation.*

CW: Yeah *Lost in Translation*; when that movie came out I called Jonathan up, my friend Jonathan and I said, ‘Jonathan, today, go get that DVD.’ He goes—so he called me back the next night laughing and he goes ‘oh my god; that’s exactly what it was like.’ You remember when they were taking the pictures and he’s holding the scotch and they’re kind of telling him how to act and everything?

So and one other thing about the Japan thing with Dat’l Do It which I thought was kind of interesting was at the time Mondale when—you know he lost the presidential election or whatever, he became the Ambassador to Japan. And I can’t remember exactly what it was. I’ll try and dig it up to—to find out but we had a problem with the export side of getting Dat’l Do It into Japan. And it was kind of a—a trade barrier or a violation of the trade agreement we had with Japan. I mean Dat’l Do It was—and this—and Walter Mondale, we had to write a letter and Walter Mondale looked into it. And you know for the life of me I can’t think of what it was. I’m going to—I’m going to try and dig it up. But he you know wrote us back a letter and said he was going to look into it. And I don’t know if it was something to do with the labeling—gosh I wish I could remember. It just came to me that—that even happened. But I remember at the time, Mondale was the Ambassador to Japan and, you know, he had written us a letter. So anyway what happened there, we got it into a few stores and it was just—it just was—was impossible. We couldn’t break the—the barrier there. And they didn’t know what hot sauces were and—and then Koto you know I guess went out of business you know because he was trying to import several different other products from America and Dat’l Do It was just one of them.

But we had a blast in Japan; I’m telling you. And we went with Koto and Koto’s best friend and this is—I mean this doesn’t have anything to do with Datil peppers but if you want to
hear it I’ll tell you. Koto was best friends with a—with another Japanese guy named Demon [Kukori] and Demon [Kukori] was the head editor of Sumo Magazine for Sumo Wrestling, okay. On top of that he was the biggest rock star in Japan and the name of his band was Twenty-First Century. That was the name of his band and it was a complete and total knockoff of Kiss.

So when we get there Koto goes we’re going to go on tour with Twenty First Century. I said what do you mean? He goes he’s—they got two tour dates and one was in Tokyo and then one was in a city called Fukui. And we took the bullet train but we were riding with the band, okay. So there’s these five Japanese guys; you know spoke perfect English and were just regular guys but they were Japanese. I still didn’t know what kind of music. I didn’t—I hadn’t seen anything. Like I said it was no internet or anything there. So anyway we go to dinner with them or like a late lunch I should say around 2 o’clock and then they were going to perform at 8:00. So we had lunch with them and then he goes we’ll see you at the show. So [Laughs] okay; so Jonathan and I and Koto go back to the hotel and we’re staying in the same hotel with the band. So we get to the hotel. It’s 3:30 in the afternoon and there’s about ten Japanese girls standing in the lobby and they’re standing there holding these beautiful bags you know like gift bags, you know that have that paper coming out.

And so we—we’re walking by them and we—we get into the—you know, going into the elevator and I was talking to Demon the head guy and I said ‘man.’ I said ‘what was this?’ He goes ‘oh, those are fans and they have gifts for us.’ And they want us—and he goes, ‘but don’t even look at them. Just ignore them.’ And I go ‘what?’ He goes ‘just don’t—don’t look at them. Just ignore them. Walk—walk right by them.’ So we just walked right by them and get in the elevator.

So when I’m in the elevator I’m going ‘Demon what—what the hell is that? These are your fans. They’re standing out there; they never made a peep. They never screamed’ ‘oh, it’s’—they just stood there with these gifts waiting to be acknowledged. And as if he didn’t acknowledge them he—they wouldn’t—it’s not in their nature to interrupt or—so if he didn’t acknowledge them they wouldn’t do anything.

And so I’m talking to Jonathan and I say ‘that’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.’

So we go upstairs and we play around in the hotel room you know and now we’re leaving to go to the concert. We go back down to the lobby and they’re there, the same girls. Now there’s more of them. They stand there. They don’t make a sound. They’re hoping that he’ll stop and talk to them. So this is when we find out they’re like Kiss. So we get to the concert venue because you know we didn’t see them again ‘til after the concert. But we get to the venue and we get out of the cab and the entire—everybody that’s going to the concert is dressed up like Kiss. They got the makeup on, the platform shoes this tall [Gestures]; it was the weirdest thing. So we’re walking around this venue and it’s all these Kiss wannabes, kids mingling around.
So we’ve got front row seats. So we go into this thing and it’s chaos. And so they come out on stage and they’re just like Kiss—bang, bang, you know just—. And the people are going bat shit in the auditorium and everything you know. And so we go to the concert which was almost unbearable. So we get through with the concert and now we’re going to dinner with them afterwards. So they go back to the hotel to change and now they’re still in full regalia. So we’re going through the lobby and these people are still there. And he ignores them and walks right by them. They don’t say ‘excuse me,’ nothing; it was the weirdest thing.

Anyway they closed the restaurant down and we go to dinner. And these guys are really interesting people. Anyway I know this story is getting kind of long, but we have dinner, and we’re going back to the hotel around 2 o’clock in the morning and we walk through the lobby and they’re there, standing there, waiting. And Jonathan and I were like, ‘this is insane.’ So we get up the next morning and we’re leaving. You know we’re—they’re there waiting for him to come out and hopefully acknowledge them and he goes, ‘no; I can’t—I won’t do it. If I even talk to them—I do anything’ he goes, ‘the next day in the paper this is my girlfriend,’ you know so he just ignores them. It was the strangest thing.

Then the same guy, Demon [Kukori] was the head of Sumo Magazine and Sumo Wrestling there is so big; it’s—so he invited us to go to this Sumo Championships or whatever in Tokyo. So the four of us went—excuse me, three of us. Demon wasn’t there. I mean he was there but you know he’s got bigger fish to fry but so we had this little square. I’m not exaggerating. It was like from my desk like this with a railing about this big Gestures gold, you know like a brass rail and then little cushions in there. And that’s where we sat and watched the Sumo Wrestling. We were right up front. And Koto told me that to get season tickets to the Sumo match and get that place for four people, $300,000 a year.

He goes, ‘to have this for one night, this space we’re sitting in, $25,000’ and I said ‘that’s insane.’ So you know I didn’t get Dat’l Do It [Laughs] going there but Datil—the Datil pepper I’m telling you has brought me to some pretty crazy places. And for that I’ll always be grateful to the Datil pepper because I would have never seen Tokyo the way I did going there with somebody that was from there. You know it just—it was—it was amazing.

The other thing that the Datil pepper did was help me go on the Group Study Exchange with Rotary to Hong Kong because your dad [Pat Hamilton] was on the committee and I had you know I was involved in Dat’l Do It and I had the restaurants going so I was like an entrepreneur businessman and we were going to go to Hong Kong on a good will business exchange. So if I hadn’t been involved in the Datil pepper I don’t think I would have been selected so you know the Datil pepper took me to Tokyo. The Datil pepper took me to Hong Kong, you know, all over the country, you know, doing food shows and I went places that I had never been before, so you know not only the Datil pepper you know was successful on the business side but you know that little green pepper really took me some interesting places.
CW: Oh my gosh; that in Japan was oh my gosh—it was so—I had never seen anything like it and expensive—oh my god. We went to a sushi bar the first night we were there, the three of us. We had some sushi and a couple beers, $1,200. I said ‘1,200 yen or 1,200 bucks?’ He goes ‘1,200 bucks.’ I went ‘holy crap.’ So I don’t remember what they were selling Dat’l Do It for there but it was probably back then the equivalent now of probably fifteen bucks you know.

AH: And it didn’t last very long?

CW: No; it—it didn’t and it was primarily—I don’t think Koto was—Koto had the same problems that you know we had here, you know getting it into the stores and having anybody show any interest in it. And—and I think he—he just suffered from the same thing that was a problem for me was just having the money and the marketing and the—and the connections.

I have a friend of mine who worked for Del Monte and he just retired but he was one of the head guys for Del Monte and having him tell you stories about how he gets products into the grocery stores is a completely different animal than myself. I mean Del Monte is like Coca Cola. ‘Hey we got a new product.’ ‘Fine; you know send it to us’ you know but for—we just didn’t have that kind of clout.

AH: Now I’m going to rewind just a little bit because you mentioned that you—when you first started out and you were making Datil pepper sauce for your restaurant, why Datil pepper? Why not something else because you mentioned you know people weren't really growing it commercially and—.

CW: Oh yeah; yeah but you know I mean it was a local thing. I mean you know anybody that has grown up here and yourself included, you know you knew what the Datil pepper was. So you know for me to use another pepper just I had never considered it you know and call it Dat’l Do It. No; I—I never really had the desire to—to make hot sauce per se. I made a sauce that was very good and I still serve it in the restaurant, but when I decided to do it on a commercial scale I never—I never considered another pepper. Only—the only thing different was like the—the grow kit, I didn’t put the Datil pepper seeds in there because I didn’t think I could get enough of them if I got a big order. But no, I never—I never considered, you know, doing it for—you know, I did it for the sake of the Datil pepper and not just the hot sauce, you know.

A couple other things though that I remember picking up along the way was that you know capsicum is what in any pepper that makes it hot. You know all this right, Scoville units and—okay anyway. They were putting pure capsicum in bottom paint for ships because the capsicum in the paint irritated—I mean the barnacles didn’t like eating it. So when they were attaching themselves to a ship it would burn
their tongue. I mean they were putting pure capsicum [note: capsaicin] for bottom paint for boats and ships and stuff as a deterrent for the organisms to—to get on it and I thought that was—that was kind of cool.

There was another—you know and I told you we were doing a lot of trade shows you know showing off the Datil pepper and it was so funny because no matter where we went and we sampled the hot sauce and stuff they would ask always the same questions. And when you hear the same stuff over and over and over and over and over again for days, ‘is it hot; how hot is it?’ You know and we would just joke about it and make fun of the people behind their back and stuff just to—just to get through the day, you know. But there was this one—one character, I’ll never forget him [Laughs]—I don’t even know if he’s in business anymore—but when that whole hot sauce craze was going on, you know the Datil pepper as the craze got bigger and bigger more and more obscure peppers that were hotter, and when I say hotter I mean by a chemical analysis of the Scoville units in it, so you know I think the Datil pepper was like in 200,000 Scoville units or something but there was more and more peppers that were getting hotter and hotter. And then the sauces were getting hotter and hotter. It was like a—an inevitable evolution in this hot sauce craze, you know.

You know any time there is some kind of a food craze people pick up on it and then they just take it to an extreme, you know Twinkies and a bigger Twinkie and then an Oreo with triple-stuffed, you know what I mean? So the whole race was on to who could make the hottest hot sauce. And most of them were a) un-edible because it was just so hot, and 2) they didn’t taste good. So I’ve never been somebody that likes hot sauce for the sake of it being hot. But there was this big race to see who could make the hottest sauce. So there was this nut; I mean I don’t know how else to describe it. His name was Dave; I don’t remember his last name, and you might want to look it up if you—if you can find it. I might even do the same thing. But it’s called Dave’s Insanity Sauce. And all it was—was pure capsicum [note: capsaicin] with some food coloring in it or something. And this—I mean it was—it was terrible but people were buying it you know just because it was the hottest sauce in the world. So people were buying it and they would let their friends taste it and they would scream and oh that’s you know—it can’t be—and then they would just put it back on the cupboard and—.

But this guy, oh god he was next to us one time; his booth was right next to ours and um, he—it was Dave’s Insanity Sauce, so his shtick was he was in a straightjacket, you know the old type, and he would—he was in a straightjacket and they’d tie him up in this straightjacket and he would stand there all day long in this straightjacket and just going on and on about his hot sauce and you know he was trying this persona that he was—that he was crazy, Dave’s Insanity Sauce, you know. And he was in this straightjacket and he would do this shtick and we would watch him all day long in this heavy canvas, you know he had to have been totally miserable.

And then at night you know all the vendors, some of them would become friends and go to dinner and stuff, but this guy was just—he was insane. And I mean we could—we could barely stand to be around him. But he was just—Dave’s Insanity Sauce; it was just pure capsicum [note: capsaicin] and he wore that straightjacket and he’d do it for days. Anyway, it’s
funny that I’m even talking about this man because I really haven’t—I haven’t given it—any of this any thought in I can’t remember. You know I can't even remember how long ago it’s been, hmm.

**AH:** Now when you were developing your recipes, you know, how did you go about that? Did you have a recipe that you had already worked with?

**CW:** Well you know the—the tricky part of that is you know when you’re coming up with recipes in the kitchen and then you’ve got to transfer that to a commercial application, like I said earlier, you know let’s say I would make—I’m just making something up for—for illustration purposes, but let’s say I’m going to come up with a salad dressing, a Datil pepper salad dressing, so I break out the mayonnaise and then I might get some spices and then lemon juice and you know, different ingredients in the restaurant and make up sauce and taste it. ‘Oh wow; this is really good.’ So now when I had that recipe you know two cups of this and one cup, teaspoon, blah, blah, blah, now I’ve got to take it to a bottler. And they say ‘okay well it’s two cups of mayonnaise’ and it’s okay. ‘What kind of mayonnaise?’ I mean well I—I use Hellman’s and well, you know, ‘we can't buy Hellman’s in 55-gallon drums so what we do is we make our own mayonnaise.’

So you know making something in the kitchen and then just handing that recipe off it—it never is the same so there’s a—there’s a science to that and we would—we had a guy named Wolfgang Puck and it wasn’t the chef, but he was a food chemist and he would help us with our nutritional information and—and help us to convert recipes to—and try to be able to duplicate it on a large scale. You know that’s—and that in itself is an art, you know to do that properly because I would make Dat’l Do It in the restaurant and then when they would make it I would taste it and go ‘no, this doesn’t taste right.’ And then trying to figure out why that was the harder part, but there is—there is a science to it. And there’s companies that’s all they do; there is—and you know there is another company called ABC Labs that we used to use which was a food science. They could say ‘okay you need mayonnaise to be of this consistency for this recipe’ and they—they would help the bottler come up with the—the formula to do it on a large-scale.

The other thing that makes a big difference is in the packaging and going to the commercial side is pasteurization. You know depending on the PH of the product whether you have to have preservatives added to it or it has to be refrigerated or it has to be pasteurized or some products that have to be pasteurized which is basically boiling it and it can change the profile of it.

I’ll tell you another quick funny story. You know Gypsy Cab the salad dressing and you know Ned, the owner? Well Ned and I are good friends. And during this whole thing I’m trying to come up with new items to put on the grocery shelf. I’m looking for that one big product you know, and I really liked Ned’s salad dressing. So Ned and I started talking and he goes ‘yeah; let’s—let’s do it. Let’s package it.’ [Laughs] So—so Ned gave me his ingredients and everything
you know. And we went down to Palmetto to package the first batch and Ned went with us and Ned had brought this yeast in a jar. And my bottler goes ‘is that active yeast?’ And he goes ‘no.’ And Jonathan goes ‘you sure?’ And he goes ‘yeah, yeah, yeah;’ he says ‘this is inactive yeast.’ And so we said ‘okay.’

So we make the stuff and we knew it was going to have to be refrigerated. So we made the stuff and Jonathan added potassium sorbate I believe it was but there’s an additive that helps preserve it you know and keep bacteria from growing. So we bring the stuff home and he goes ‘just leave it on the—leave it in the case and let’s just let it sit for a while before we do anything and let’s see what happens to it,’ you know just—. So we did and I had it in my office. And I’m sitting in my office and all of the sudden I hear boom. I thought ‘what the hell was that?’ And then I heard boom. And then I look up on my bookshelf. I had—they had a case of the salad dressing there. And it was exploding inside the jar because the bacteria—and it wasn’t bacteria. Come to find out that it wasn’t inactive yeast; it was inactive as long as it was dry.

But when it gets wet yeast activates and that’s what Jonathan was asking him when he said inactive yeast—it’s the yeast has been killed; it’s dead. So we had [laughs]—we made probably forty cases of Ned’s Gypsy Cab salad dressing and I called Ned up and I said ‘Ned get all that salad dressing you have and throw it in the dumpster’ because this stuff was just boom, boom, boom, boom blowing up and it was funny.

AH: Goodness gracious; now and you grew up in St. Augustine?

CW: Yeah.

AH: Is your family from here?

CW: No, no; we were—I was born in Miami and we lived in Cuba ‘til Castro took over and then after Castro took over I guess about six months after Castro took over we moved back to Miami and then almost immediately moved from Miami to St. Augustine. And my dad started a cigar factory on St. George Street because you know you couldn’t get Cuban cigars anymore. So my dad brought some rollers from Cuba and was buying tobacco from Honduras and the places that were similar and was rolling cigars and, you know, that’s how we got to St. Augustine.

AH: That’s really interesting. I had no idea.

CW: Yeah; my dad ran the Flamingo Bar at the Tropicana in Havana. And I’ve got you know photos of them with Lucy Arnez, you know Lucy—you know, I Love Lucy. Lucille Ball, I
couldn’t think of her name, but that’s how—that’s how we got to St. Augustine. But I’ve been in St. Augustine since third grade, you know—just a kid so this is my home.

AH: Do you remember when you were introduced to Datil peppers?

CW: Oh yeah; yeah when I was a kid, I was telling you. You know we were in fifth and sixth grade we would make those concoctions and—and I remember we would—when I worked at Osteen’s we would make Datil pepper vinegar which if you, you know it can be pretty hot and I remember we were always surfing and our lips were always cut and chapped. And this was way before sunscreen or any of that stuff.

And we would just stick our finger in the—the Datil pepper vinegar and you know one of our friends was there with chapped lips we’d just go out there and rub it on their lips and it would you know burn them and they’d scream and run around and—. But yeah; I would say I guess I was probably—I was probably 10 before we—you know when you have paper routes, so we had the Datil peppers that we would spray and—. But as far as eating the Datil pepper I really got exposed to it in that venue when I worked at Osteen’s and I worked for Mr. Osteen who was just an absolute prince of a man.

They took me in. I lived with them for a couple of years when I was in—when I was a teenager. Both of them have passed away. Mrs. Osteen just died about, oh I guess about two years ago. But that’s where I got exposed to the Datil pepper and Datil pepper sauce because we made one at Osteen’s too. But then I—I—like I said I was the first one to ever really try and make—make something of it. I probably am not the best person to have done that; I think somebody with a little bit more knowledge about it might have taken it a little further, but you know it’s the way it was.

AH: So is it a version of their recipe that you ended up using at Barnacle Bill’s?

CW: Well we—we made it at Osteen's in small batches. When I went to—when I opened up Barnacle(s) I started making it myself and then you know it was funny because it was myself and Richard Chellemi and Dan and we started you know—it was the first time—you know when we did it—when we made it at Osteen’s it was you know we had the Datil peppers and you know you mixed it with ketchup and we’d put whatever stuff that was there so it wasn’t—we never really—we made the Datil pepper sauce like we would make coleslaw sauce or shrimp sauce you know that we served for the fried shrimp. And so when I went to Barnacle Bill’s I wanted to expand on—and from what I had learned and start doing other things, you know so we made the Dat’l Do It and then I started—I put applesauce in it at first and so there’s a lot of stuff that I had in the very original recipe that when I made it and packaged it myself, but over the years when I got into a commercial bottling we had to tweak the recipe you know to make it what it is.
But now, I mean ever since I sold the company every year before Christmas I break out my pots and pans and I make my original Datil pepper recipe old-school way and I do it every year and Burt Tavery my neighbor is a—he loves hot peppers and he grows habanero—I mean he grows yeah habaneros and scotch bonnets and stuff. So right around—right after Thanksgiving and before Christmas he and I get in here. My wife gets so mad and I can bring big pots from the restaurant and we’re in here all day and we make it in the same way in that jar and so I—I have it—my Dat’l Do It private reserve. So I have my original recipe that I came up with at Barnacle Bill’s when I—when I started doing it myself.

Actually at Osteen’s I never made it. Lonnie would make it or you know they would do it once you know once every blue moon and—and then they would—they would just keep it in gallon jugs and so you know when I went over there I started with, you know, everybody—I started with Datil peppers and ketchup and then I just started adding stuff, lemon juice until I got it the way I wanted it and then that became the basis for Dat’l Do It. And then I tweaked the recipe over the years to accommodate, you know, doing the commercial.

But I have some of my private reserve. I’ll give you a couple jars before you leave. So I still do that; I’m still connected. I still make the hot sauce the same way I did you know when I started in 1981. But I don’t—I don’t make too much—I’ll make Datil pepper vinegar and I’ll make the red sauce but I don’t—I don’t do too much with mustards or some of the other stuff that I came up with ‘cause this is really—this is what I—it’s what I like and I eat fried shrimp and I dip it in Dat’l Do It, so—.

AH: And what is the best way to use the—the sauce?

CW: Well the—the Dat’l Do It recipe that I use isn’t the—it’s not—you know on a scale of one to ten in the heat index you know for what’s out there I’d say it’s probably a three or a four. Burt my next door neighbor loves it just super-hot so when I make my batch I’ll use—I’m just—you know I’ll use six cups of Datil peppers. Well Burt makes the same batch which he doesn’t really make it; he sits there and runs his mouth while I do it all for him, but he helps me bottle it up but he’ll put twelve cups in because he just wants it super-hot.

But mine, you can eat it right out of the jar and it’s got the right heat level. So I use it in a lot of different recipes too. Like I’ll put it in—in barbecue sauce if I want to make the barbecue sauce a little hotter or I’ll do it—put it in a shrimp sauce and so I use it probably 70-percent of the time just straight you know just the way I make it. And then the other 30-percent of the time I’m mixing it in other stuff you know, tartar sauce and just to give it a little bit of kick, but—. You know, I don’t like super-hot things.

As a matter of fact, on the flip side of that at Coquina Beach, my restaurant at the beach, we’re going to start doing a pepper pizza and it’s going to have Datil pepper, habanero, and it’s like if you can eat the whole pizza, you know, your beer is free or whatever. So we’re—we’re
going to do something like that and I’d like to do some things that are going to be a little bit more focused on the Datil pepper. But you know the whole heat craze has kind of waned a little bit now. You know it’s not as—it’s not as big a deal.

And you know what’s funny, is that when I started out there were probably three or four players in the hot sauce business on a big scale. You know you had Tabasco, there was Texas Pete, Louisiana Hot Sauce, and then this whole hot sauce craze goes crazy and there’s thousands of different hot sauces just—it’s insane. And then now that whole thing has waned and if you go back into the grocery store, Tabasco, Texas Pete, Louisiana, you know they’re just the same players are there, so they—you know they’ve lived through the whole hot sauce craze and then now it’s back to just the same—same players you know. It’s kind of interesting.

AH: Test of time.

CW: Uh-hm.

AH: Well those are all my questions. Is there anything that you want to add or that I didn’t ask you that I should know?

CW: Oh gosh; I don’t know—I don’t know. I know I kind of just rambled on but it’s just really weird because I hadn't even thought about any of this stuff in so long. I was trying to think is there anything on the—just on the Datil pepper side that I recalled early on? No; I don’t think so. I know there was—when I was trying to market the Datil pepper I was trying to come up with as many things as I could that—that would make the Datil pepper unique or stand out. And one of them was trying to figure out where it really stood on the heat scale. And then that’s when I started to find out that there were just a lot of other peppers that were out there that were even hotter than the habanero. And so as the hotter and hotter peppers started becoming known, it kind of pushed the Datil pepper down the scale. So I couldn’t say ‘oh this is you know—the second hottest pepper in the world.’

So then you kind of had to go well, the flavor of the Datil pepper is so much different and it really isn’t, you know. You stick your tongue on the inside of a habanero or a Datil pepper you’re not going to be able to go ‘oh yeah; that’s a—that’s a habanero from you know Jamaica. The aroma is so’—you know, it’s hot. So you know as it became wider known and all these different other peppers then the Datil pepper just kind of got lost in the shuffle again. But still for St. Augustine I think there’s—the tourists still come and buy it at Publix because they heard of it and you know their friends say ‘hey, when you’re in St. Augustine make sure you get some Dat’ Do It.’ And I think a lot of the other companies, um, I know Marcia McQuaig started a hot sauce company and there’s a couple of them out there. So I think that the Datil pepper is a little bit—or it’s a lot better known than it was when I started because the tourists still come to St. Augustine.
and it’s kind of like when back in the ’70s and stuff you couldn’t get Coor’s Beer here; you know you could only get it in Colorado or out West, so everybody would say ‘hey when you’re there don’t forget; you know get me a six pack of Coor’s Beer.’ And I remember when they—we— somebody brought a couple of six packs back and we got some—a hold of some Coor’s and then we would go to the motorcycle races or somewhere and we had drank the Coor’s you know two weeks earlier, but would bring the cans with us.

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And then we’d pour our Pabst Blue Ribbon or whatever we had in our Coor’s can so we wanted to be cool, you know; ‘yeah we got Coor’s, plenty of Coor’s.’ And people oh let me have a sip and they’d say oh man that’s so good. I said ‘it’s Pabst Blue Ribbon, you dumbass.’ So and I think the Datil pepper it’s—it’s—it’s definitely better known than it was. I don’t know how much I had to do with that but there’s still—. You know I do miss being involved in it because I like the creative side of trying to come up with you know Test Tube Babies and Grow Kits and—and so I kind of miss that part of it but not enough to start another company, anyway—.

01:31:39

AH: I think you have quite a legacy.

01:31:40

CW: Oh god.

01:31:41

AH: And I think that’s true. Well thank you so much.

01:31:44

CW: Oh you’re welcome.

01:31:44

AH: I really appreciate your time.

01:31:45

[End Chris Way]