Anna Hamilton: This is Anna Hamilton. Today is Saturday, November 3rd, 2012, and it's about ten a.m in the morning. And I am with Mrs. Mary Ellen Masters here just off the side of Faver Dykes State Park and we're here to talk about sort of, her experience with Minorcans and the Datil pepper and everything in between. For the record, would you tell me your name and what you do?

Mary Ellen Masters: OK, Mary Ellen Masters. And my husband and I own a sod farm in Hastings. We've farmed all of our lives.

AH: And have you been here all of your life?

MM: Oh yes. Definitely. Actually I'll tell you this little bit of information: my great-grandparents were the first couple married in Saint Ambrose Church, in Elkton. So we're sixth —our grandchildren are sixth generation there.

AH: Wow. So what year—

MM: They were married in 1888.

AH: And how did your family come to be in this area?

MM: Well, we came from Minorca. The Masters came over with Turnbull from Minorca [music from the clock starts playing the background].

AH: And were you—so your family came from New Smyrna and then—

MM: Mhm, and then up to Saint Augustine, right. Because they went to New Smyrna first.

AH: And have they always lived in this area or have they lived all around Saint Augustine?

MM: Actually, my part of the family lives in Elkton. Moccasin Branch. We're the country Masters. And my maiden name is Masters, too. So that brings in a lot of the family.

AH: That's interesting. Is there a difference between the city Minorcans and the country Minorcans?

MM: Well not really, except they live in Saint Augustine and we live out in Elkton area. And of course we're all—my family are members of Saint Ambrose Catholic Church, and the Saint Augustine Minorcans go to the Cathedral and the other Catholic churches in town. And we don't even know some of them.

AH: Really?

MM: Oh yeah. There're so many Masters around that people will ask, "well do you know so and so Masters?" And I'll say, "no, not really!" [laughs].

AH: Long-lost family.

MM: Yeah, we're all related but I don't know them all.
AH: Right. Now Minorcans, do they include Greek or are there a few other—

MM: Yes. Turnbull was a Scottish physician and he was given the challenge of bringing a self-sustaining race of people to Florida, to settle the New World. And he based his gathering point in the Balearic Sea, Mediterranean Sea, the Balearic Islands, which is the major island and the minor island. And he gathered people from around the Mediterranean countries and took them to Minorcan to await their trip, which I don't know how long it was, maybe a year, two years, something like that. But there were Greeks, Italians and maybe some—I don’t know, others. But while they were living on the island of Minorca, they intermarried with the Minorcans. And that made a lot larger number of people to bring over. So they all came. I don't—800 maybe. I really don't know, Carol [Lopez Bradshaw] could tell you how many came in the 1700s. And they went to New Smyrna and were supposed to do indigo plantations for Turnbull. And the work was really tough, hard, they had to clear all the land and plant the indigo and so after, I don't know, maybe six years [coughs], excuse me, they kind of revolted and decided they weren't staying there any more. So that's when they came to Saint Augustine for the protection of the fort [coughs]. Excuse me [coughs], I don't know what happened. So that's just a synopsis of Minorcan history.

AH: OK. So have you been to Minorca? Have any of the—

MM: I have not but many of them have. [Coughs] Excuse me. When you talk to Carol she can tell you. Because anybody that goes to Minorca talks to her first to get information of places to stay and the time of year to go and that sort of thing.

AH: That would be interesting, to go back and see family.

MM: Yeah, it is. And our—the Masters family goes back to the 1100s on the island [coughs]. Excuse me. And we had a cousin of my husband’s did a family history and she actually went to Minorca and she said that she found names back to the 1100s but only on head stones at cemeteries because there were no written records that far back.

AH: Wow, that's amazing.

MM: So that's a long time ago [laughs].

AH: Yeah, yeah. So then is your husband a Minorcan also?

MM: Yes, he is.

AH: And his last name is Masters.

MM: Mm-hm.

AH: OK. Do any of the Minorcans still speak, is it Catalan? Or Spanish?

MM: No.

AH: That wasn't passed down?

MM: Mm-mm.
AH: OK. Well, I'm super interested in Datil peppers.

MM: OK.

AH: Can you—do you know the history of Datil peppers?

MM: I don't. There's always been—I've been told my whole life growing up that they came from Minorca. But I think people are deciding that that's not true. Probably they came from the islands, the Caribbean Islands. Also there was a story going around that they would only grow and produce here in Saint Johns County. Well that's not true either. Because the people that have some of the Datil pepper companies that make the hot sauce were growing them in Costa Rica for years. And Central America. And they produced well in that atmosphere. So that's why, sort of, everybody generally thinks they came from the islands.

AH: That's interesting, because they still have an association with the Minorcan people.

MM: Right.

AH: Even though they didn't come from Minorca—or maybe.

MM: Now I know there's a pediatrician in Palatka, Dr. Jump, that has relatives on the island of Minorca. And I had spoken to him one time about peppers and he called or wrote or whatever and got them to send me some peppers from the island. Well they don't even remotely look like our peppers. They look more like chili peppers, or jalepenos, than they do the Datils.

AH: That's interesting. So it's a totally different variety.

MM: Mm-hm. And he said the people over there don't know what a Datil pepper is, by that name anyway.

AH: Now, what do they use those chili peppers for on Minorca?

MM: I don't know, I really don't know. They do a lot of spicy foods, which is, you know, we've—that's our way of cooking. I'm sure they use them in their recipes for the heat.

AH: Now do you know where the name Datil came from?

MM: I don't. I really don't. I don't know. Maybe Carol might know. But I've never asked anybody that question so I don't know that.

AH: So did you grow up eating Datil peppers?

MM: Oh yes, my mother was a fantastic cook and she used Datil peppers a lot. She taught me how to cook and she put them in practically everything.

AH: So what are some of the ways you use Datil peppers?

MM: Grits, we make Datil pepper grits, and then every time we make a pilau, you know what a pilau is, I have to use some in that. Or clam chowder, I use a lot of Datil peppers in clam
chowder. And of course our old used to be stand by was gopher stew, which we can't do anymore, but we used to put a lot in that. I put them in cornbread, when I make twelve grain bread. I used them in cheesecake and key lime pie, you name it, basically.

AH: So do you use the sauce or do you use the pepper? 8:54

MM: No I use the peppers, the peppers. And, well when I make the coleslaw I use the Datil pepper vinegar. It's really good. You can make it hot or not.

AH: What's your favorite—do you have a favorite Datil pepper—

MM: Probably crackling—Datil pepper crackling cornbread is one of my favorites. And then—I don't know that I have a favorite. Pilau, we love pilau.

AH: Now, I know what pilau is, but will you explain—

MM: It's a dish that's—actually my mother always said that pilau was just something to stretch other food that was leftover or whatever, but it's no longer that. We make it because we like it. You fry down onions and tomatoes and celery and some people put bell pepper in it. Fry it down and make like a thick, dark roux and then you put rice—meat, rice and your spices in it. And cook it till it's done.

AH: Is there like a secret to making a good pilau?

MM: There must be because I don't care how many times you make it it turns out different every time [laughs]. I'm one of those cooks that don't measure, so that's probably the reason mine will be different from time to time. I just start throwing stuff in a pot. We use the peppers and peas, beans, black beans, everything.

AH: So how many peppers do you think you go through in a week then? 10:29

MM: Um, a dozen or so a week, just for the two of us. But then when I have an occasion—I make the clam chowder for Saint Ambrose Fair, and we recently finished that, I made 130 gallons. And I probably used, I want to say, maybe, probably over two quarts of processed Datil peppers.

AH: Oh my gosh.

MM: Chopped, put through the food processor. Chopped up real fine. At least two quarts. It could've been more.

AH: How did you make 130 gallons?

MM: Just [laughs]—you start with one pot and you expand. We started making it for the fair probably—well they used to have gopher stew for the fair and when they could no longer do that we wanted something that was really Minorcan-related. And I guess I've been doing it for about twenty-five years. And I started out making one fifteen-gallon pot just to see, you know, if the people like it. And so we're up to eight of those huge big pots now. And that's all the capacity we have.
AH: So people like it.

MM: They love it. I mean every year I hold my breath that it's going to turn out the same but they all come back for it. We usually sell it all out.

AH: What are the other things that are at the Saint Ambrose Fair?

MM: In the spring we do pilau, do pork pilau. And then they just started a fall festival, I think this past one was either the forth or fifth one we've done. They started out doing like an Octoberfest. And people would come out there and wonder, ‘where's the clam chowder?’ Well I didn't have a clam chowder because there was some people doing a low country boil and somebody was making chili and that sort of thing. And they said, ‘gosh you know if you need it for the fall, that's the best time to have it,’ so. Due to public pressure [laughs], this past year they asked me to bring it for the Fall Festival, so I did. And we had, actually, they didn't do the low country boil because it's too expensive, and didn't do the chili. So we had like pulled pork dinners and the chowder.

AH:Yum.

MM: And it went over very well. And in the spring, like I say, we do the pilau and we usually do ham dinners as well because so many people that come to our fairs anymore don't know what pilau is. They'll ask you, ‘well what is pilau?’ Because they're not from around here [laughs]. But they always like the chowder.

AH: What do you tell them when they ask?

MM: We try to explain what it is. That it's an old Minorcan dish. ‘Well what's a Minorcan?’ [laughs] OK, well let's go back and just tell you it's rice and meat, tomatoes [laughs].

AH: But do you think having those Minorcan dishes made people more interested in that kind of food, and local food, by saying, ‘oh this is a Minorcan dish.’

MM: Well I think so. The Saint Ambrose Parish was mostly Minorcan families that lived out there when the parish started and it's just an old traditional thing that you have Minorcan food at whatever kind of fundraisers that we have and last year in the fall our priest, Father Tim, asked me to do—I wasn't doing clam chowder so he wanted me to do something Minorcan. I said, ‘well that means pilau or chowder.’ He said, ‘no they're doing that other stuff,’ so we did some desserts. There's—it's called ‘fromajades.’ They serve them at Easter. The old story is that the guys would go through the streets of the cities in Minorca serenading the ladies, and they would give them these fromajades as a treat. And they're just a rolled out dough with cheese and a little butter, and you press it over until it looks like a miniature turnover. And bake those. And you make a cross in it so the cheese can bubble up. Some people put cinnamon on it or eat it plain. So I got a group of ladies together and we did fromajades. And we did—it's called potato candy. And it came from Minorca, the recipe did. You boil a few—it doesn't take a lot of potatoes and then you put powdered sugar in it. And just keep stirring it, and stirring and stirring it until it almost looks like divinity. Real sweet. So we did that for the—and it all went over good. Everybody—everything sold out but they still wanted to know where the chowder was [laughs]. I said, ‘well, you have to speak to the head of the fair board.’ I gave everybody his name, and evidently a lot of people asked him because he said, ‘you're going to have to make
the chowder.’ [Laughs]

AH: [Laughs] He got enough petitions.

MM: Right, right.

AH: Well I've never heard of the potato candy or the fromajades before.

MM: Well they're old Minorcan traditions. You're too young to remember the St. George Pharmacy that was on St. George Street years ago. They used to make the fromajades there and sell them. They had a lunch counter in there and they made them there. And then my great-grandmother Pellicer lived in St. Augustine, used to make them at Easter. She would give—she'd send a little box to each family of like ten, eight or ten little fromajades in it.

AH: That's nice.

MM: So we'd—then her daughter, my great aunt started making them. I have another—a cousin that makes them regularly. And for the Minorcan Festival in March they always have the fromajades there.

AH: OK.

MM: They get—Carol tries to get maybe, a couple dozen differnt people to make some. It's pretty time consuming to make them.

AH: How do you make them?

MM: Well you roll out your dough and you cut it and you have to have it the exact right size. And then you put your grated cheese and butter in there, seal the edges up with a fork and bake them.

AH: So it's like a pie dough almost?

MM: It is a pie dough, yeah.

AH: And it's only at Easter.

MM: That's the tradition. But we had them in the fall last year at the fair [laughs] because that's what Father wanted to have, something Minorcan. That's the only thing I could think of that wasn't chowder or pilau.

AH: Right. Do they still do the serenading?

MM: No, not here they don't. They might over there, I'm not sure.

AH: And I'm sure that would include some traditional Minorcan songs or something?

MM: Probably, yeah.

AH: Do you know of any—
MM: No, I don't. Sorry. But I make Datil pepper mustard and of course I make the red sauce that we use on all of our seafood. And I've made Datil pepper cheese, and Datil pepper mustard—I mean mayonnaise.

AH: Is that by using vinegar from the Datil peppers?

MM: No, you chop the peppers up to put in it. Green peppers. Or they can be frozen as long as they're not pickled by the vinegar.

AH: I'm sure of course you have old recipes from your family.

MM: I don't have any written recipes. Just things my mother—when I was like twelve years old when my mother went to work and had to go to work and she would—I was the oldest girl in the house so she would write these, her recipes out step by step by step for me to do when I'd get home from school. But it'd like making spaghetti or meatloaf or you know, something simple that you don't really have to have a recipe for. But she had to tell me what to do because I didn't know. So that was when I started cooking. And I'd make beef stew and then she'd come home and fine tune everything and make sure everything was the right flavors. But she didn't have any written out recipes and neither do I. I did make—St. Ambrose did a cookbook two years ago and we have a Minorcan section in the cookbook and I—to the best of my knowledge [laughs] sat down and tried to figure out the—and I told everybody, 'if you use any of my recipes they won't be—they won't taste like what you think because I don't know how much of anything to put it.' But I had like—I put the chowder recipe in. I went by the ingredients I bought, the amounts of ingredients I bought and broke it down to a reasonable amount. Of course I couldn't tell them how many—how much spice to use because I measure, I pour it out by hand and put it in the pots and go along and come back and test it and see, well this needs a little more, that's OK, that sort of thing.

AH: Right. Right.

MM: And then when we make the chowder for the fair we have wimpy, mild, medium and hot—Minorcan hot. Different—with different amounts of pepper in it. Because to have clam chowder you have to have some Datil pepper in it or else it just doesn't taste right. And I put just enough that it doesn't burn somebody that's not used to eating hot stuff but just give it the flavor.

AH: Right.

MM: But the Minorcan hot's hot. I mean it'll make your nose run [laughs] and your eyes run. And you'd be amazed at the people that want the hot. They'll come stand there and, 'how hot is the hot?' And I'll say, 'well, for my taste it's hot enough.' And then we always have a little bowl of chopped up green Datil pepper sitting on the table in case anybody wants to add a little bit to theirs. Sprinkle a little bit on the top, you know.

AH: Now that's what Johnny [Barnes] said when, 'oh you should talk to Mrs. Masters because she has this thing that she does where she adds peppers throughout the cooking.'

MM: Mm-hm.

AH: 'She's, like, the best.'
MM: Oh I don't know about that [laughs].

AH: Well that's according to Johnny.

MM: Well when—the old timey way of doing the chowder, you don't ever cook the clams very much. So you get all your seasonings done and your vegetables cooked and then you put the clams in. And my mother would chop the Datil peppers up and put them in when she turned it off. Just, you know, mix it in and that point. I really can't see a whole lot of difference in doing that or putting them in earlier. But I do put them in at different stages during the chowder preparation. I'll put a few in and then go back and test it all a couple hours later and add some to the hot. Just, I can't tell you how I do it [laughs] I just do it.

AH: And he said that came a lot from your mom and word of mouth.

MM: Yeah basically, she—it started out as her clam chowder recipe but I changed it some, tweaked it around a little bit. I cook it a lot more than she did. A lot of your chowders will be—if you ever eat it in a restaurant they'll have like the potatoes will be a little bit firm and the vegetables are. But I cook mine way down till it makes almost a mush, really. The potatoes cook down, it's really really thick. I have these metal stir paddles, they're like this long [gestures], and you set them down in the—

AH: Wow, so like three feet?

MM: Huh?

AH: Like three feet long?

MM: Three or four. And you set them—stick them in the middle of the pot and turn loose and when they stand on their own then the chowder's done [laughs]. Because it's thick enough to hold the paddle.

AH: That's a great idea. That's great. Are there rivalries between some of the Minorcan families about, 'I have the best clam chowder, I have the best—'

MM: Oh everybody says theirs is the best, of course. Go to the Chowder Debate tomorrow and you'll see. Of course those are restaurants. My husband's been wanting me to make chowder for that. But I could ask them if I could do it under the name of St. Ambrose, but they're all restaurants that compete in that. You'll see—if there're twenty restaurants, there'll be twenty different chowders and twenty different flavors. And they'll all say theirs is the best [laughs]. Everybody thinks there's is the best.

AH: Maybe that's part of the competition. Everyone's sort of beating their chest.

MM: Right. It is. We have—our family—the DuPont side of the family has a reunion every two years and we have a little contest on the chowder and my brother, youngest brother is very highly competitive and he thinks his chowder's the best and of course mine is better than his [laughs]. But there's always this back and forth, you know [laughs].
AH: [Laughs] My family does that at Christmas. We have a Christmas caroling party every year and everybody makes potato soup and it's the same thing.

MM: Have you ever have vichyssoise? Cold potato soup?

AH: Uh-uh.

MM: Oh, yum. That is so good.

AH: It sounds really good.

MM: Oh, by the way. I put Datil peppers in my—we have—when the potatoes are fresh in May I make stuffed potatoes to put in the freezer and I chop Datil peppers up and put in the potatoes. And of course when we bake potatoes we cut our Datil peppers up on top.

AH: Really? I don't think I've ever—well, we always just had so much sauce that we make that that's the only way I think really we—

MM: The red sauce?

AH: Yeah.

MM: Yeah.

AH: Which is interesting. But we never—I guess unless we're cooking greens we never really use the entire peppers.

MM: Mustard greens you have to have Datil pepper vinegar on the greens.

AH: Mm-hm.

MM: Now have you taught some of your kids some of the tricks of the trade?

MM: Well, two of my—my two oldest sons don't cook. My youngest son is a cook and he's really learning how to do everything the way I do it. When he started out cooking a few years ago he'd always call me and want to know, 'well how do you do this and how do you do that?' So he's coming along really good. Now we have a daughter that's an absolutely phenomenal cook but she does not use pepper. Her children don't like pepper, she doesn't like pepper, her husband likes pepper so he comes over here and eats everything hot but she doesn't use any pepper when she cooks and I find that really strange. Because she grew up on it. I mean everything she had here was peppered up [laughs]. Oh I have to tell you this one, when my oldest son was about—he must have been in about the fourth grade, he went to school over at St Joe [St. Joseph's Academy] and he told the nuns, he said, 'my momma puts Datil pepper in everything she cooks, even cake.' Well I had made a cornbread and put Datil pepper in it, he thought it was cake [laughs].

AH: [Laughs] What did the nuns say to that?

MM: They just laughed. 'Yeah, well we figured that would be the case.' [Laughs]
AH: That's funny. That's funny. So the traditional recipes that would involve Datil peppers would be the clam chowder—

MM: Pilau.

AH: —and the pilau.

MM: And well, the cornbread with the peppers in it. I don't know what other—of course I use Datil peppers in anything so I don't know how traditional the recipes are. They're just recipes that I've either made up or my mother told me or whatever.

AH: Do you think that's a common thing that a lot of Minorcans have started using peppers in everything from, you know, cornbread to cheesecake or baked potatoes—

MM: Well a lot of them do but a lot of them—well my brothers, I have two brothers that are cooks. They both Datil pepper in everything they make too. My sister doesn't use Datil pepper hardly at all. She doesn't cook like I do. She does more basic cooking than the traditional recipes that we have handed down. I don't really know how much—I do know some Minorcans that use Datil peppers but I don't know how much they use them if they use them as much as I do or not.

AH: Why do you use so many of them?

MM: Because I just like them. They just taste good [laughs]. My husband—see here [points to Datil peppers lying on the counter]? When he eats supper he'll sit there and bite it off and eat it like that. I don't eat them like that, that's a little too hot for me. Now I cut it up. I had him go out—we have peppers growing out here by the pool. I had him go out and pick me a pepper for supper last night because I lad lima beans, dried lima beans and rice. So I chopped that up on my plate of beans.

AH: Now we always used them green like that.

MM: Mm-hm.

AH: And I hadn't really seen them used much when they were ripe until Johnny started experimenting with vinegars. Do you have a favorite—?

MM: I like them green. Sometimes I'll get too many of them and they'll start turning yellow. And I'll still use them. And I don't really see a lot of difference in the flavor. Some people say they're hotter. I don't think they are. I think they're just yellow instead of green. And a lot of people don't use their seeds when they make hot sauce. My brother in law makes hot sauce and he doesn't put the seeds in it. But I put—I use the whole pepper in everything, everywhere I use it.

AH: Isn't that where the heat is, is in the seeds?

MM: Well they say there's more heat in the seeds. But no, that little outside thing is hot, too [laughs].

AH: [Laughs] That's true, that's true. So you have some bushes outside?
MM: I do. And they're on their last leg. They're on the downside. We quit fertilizing them a couple—about a month ago. So they're really not flourishing. But there are some peppers.

AH: How many plants do you have?

MM: I think five or six, I'm not sure. One, two—maybe five. I just—every year—we always grew our own plants. And it's such a hassle to get them started early enough that you have them early enough in the year. So my husband started going over to the Vo-Tech because Eddie Lambert that's the head of the ag program over there has the best pepper bushes. And they're started—he starts them in the hot house. So he went and got—every year he goes and gets—I have to make him not get—he wants to get a whole truckload. Well I can't handle that many. I don't want that many. I think he got four from over there this year. But he usually gets eight or ten and it takes me forever to pick the peppers and then I have all this wad of peppers that I don't need.

AH: Can you save them and use them for the St. Ambrose Fair?

MM: I do. I have peppers in the freezer that are four or five years old and they're still good. But I can only use so many. I put up—I start out putting them in vinegar, the first ones we get. Then I'll make red sauce. Then I'll make the mustard sauce. And I'll make some sauce with these before they finish to use the fresh peppers.

AH: So how often do you make the red sauce and—

MM: I usually only make the red sauce twice a year but my recipe makes thirteen—quarts. Quarts? Yeah. Thirteen and a half quarts. So that's a lot of red sauce.

AH: That is a lot of red sauce.

MM: And then my mustard, I do a couple times a year. And it makes like, oh, maybe four quarts at a time. But Datil pepper vinegar, I've got it stacked everywhere. It's in the top of my pantry, in the cabinets over there, it's everywhere [laughs]. And every time somebody comes I give them pepper vinegar. 'Here, take this.' I need to use it up. The kids, I give it to—my daughters in law and my youngest son has his own plants so he doesn't really use a lot of my peppers. But I try to keep them supplied.

AH: Good mom.

MM: Well, I don't like to see them wasted and I know that if—now the red sauce, I don't know about it. I've never had any that I thought was tasting too old, but your vinegar will get kind of a old flavor to it if you keep it three or four years [laughs]. So I try to make that turn over pretty regularly.

AH: Now when you make the vinegar, once you use up a bottle—

[REDACTED]

AH: [husband Lawrence Masters comes inside] Here he comes. Larry, this is Anna Hamilton.
AH: Hi there. Nice to meet you, sir.

LM: Nice to meet you too. How are you?

AH: Good. How are you?

MM: She's looking—we got sidetracked.  

[REDACTED]  

MM: I was just telling her I had to keep you from getting too many Datil peppers. Because we have—

LM: Then you've got to pick them.

MM: Yeah.

LM: We picked what, two gallons one time?

MM: Well these—yeah these plants bear—they produce a lot. Sometimes a gallon or two gallon buckets at a time. It takes a long time to pick that many peppers.

AH: Right.

LM: Did you see the bigger ones?

MM: No she hadn't been out there yet.

LM: Oh you haven't been out.

AH: Not yet.

MM: We have some—some people call them 'super Datils.' We call them 'McDermotts' because a friend of ours named Richard McDermott is the one that produced them.

AH: OK.

MM: And some people say, 'oh they're not real Datil peppers' but they are. He—I don't know how many years ago he would pick the biggest peppers on his bushes—

LM: I'm going to let you all go back to your—

MM: He would save the seeds and plant the seeds from the biggest peppers and then he would hand pollinate everything so he made sure they got the right cross until he kept, you know, doing them every year until they were that big around [gestures a few inches]. They’re huge.

AH: Wow.

MM: One is probably equivalent to four or five Datil peppers.

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AH: Do they produce as many Datil peppers?

MM: Oh yeah, we'll go out and look at them if you want to. They're hanging like grapes out there [laughs].

LM: Don't forget to tell her about Datil pepper cheesecake, cornbread—Datil pepper cornbread —

MM: Mm-hm, I've told her about all of it.

LM: The list goes one.

MM: [Laughs]. He's lucky that he married me because his mother doesn't cook with Datil peppers and he loves them so. She never used them [laughs].

AH: Now can you all taste the difference between, like if you have something that's spicy—or a pepper product, can you tell that it's not Datil pepper?

MM: Probably. I don't know what that would be. Well sometimes I use that—the Tabasco sauce and that on things. Oh we use Datil pepper vinegar on french fries.

AH: That's a great idea.

MM: It's really good.

AH: Now when you make the vinegar, once you use up a bottle do you just refill it? Or do you —

MM: No. I toss it. I always toss it. Now if we ever have a scarcity of peppers I might rethink that. But I boil my vinegar and when you pour it in the bottle, the boiling vinegar, it kind of cooks the peppers and they—if you redo it they're real mushy.

AH: Do you slice them open and then—

MM: I do, I do. I cut them open. And those McDermotts I have to cut in quarters because they're so big. But they're so hot. The pepper sauce is just phenomenal. The Datil pepper vinegar off of those is great. Because it's so much hotter than the regular vinegar.

AH: Are there, besides the McDermotts, other kinds of Datils?

MM: There are. There're some people that—there's a sweet Datil that doesn't have any heat but it has the Datil flavor. And a lot of people like those and grow those but I thought, 'well why bother?' You know? That doesn't make sense to me [laughs]. But there're a lot of people that want the sweet Datils.

AH: You could put it in the wimpy chowder.

MM: Right [laughs]. There you go. Keep from getting too much heat.
AH: [Laughs] That's right. So some people save their seeds every year and then replant them.

MM: Mm-hm. We don't any more. We used to. But it's so easy to go over there and get those and they're in the pots and they're already this big the first part of March. And you're picking peppers in April. Whereas when we plant our own seeds we're like into May and June before we have any ready to pick. So. They grow them over there as a training thing. They don't charge a lot for them. I mean they're five or six dollars for a nice Datil pepper bush and a lot of times they're already blooming when he gets them.

AH: Wow.

MM: So that's way smarter [laughs].

AH: Where do you get them?

MM: At the Vo-Tech in St. Augustine.

AH: OK. I'm trying to think—oh, do you—do you remember the first time you had something with Datil pepper in it?

MM: Oh my gosh no. It would've been at my mother's knee [laughs], I guess. Because she cooked with Datil peppers. Everything she cooked had Datil peppers in it. I can't—I can't remember being without Datil peppers.

AH: And—what else. Do you think it matters where the Datil pepper came from?

MM: Not a bit. I don't think it matters at all. I mean, people like to say it came from Minorca because that just sounds cool, you know. But as long as it got here I don't care where it came from [laughs]. As long as we have them. I would think it'd be a dreary existence to have to live without them.

AH: Now it's interesting because a lot of—how popular the bottling of Datil pepper sauce has been and selling them, with Dat'l Do-It and Dat'l Dew and all of them—

MM: Right, right.

AH: I'm sure there's thousands of them out there.

MM: Thousands of them out there.

AH: But it's interesting that the people who started that weren't Minorcans and yet the pepper is associated with Minorcans.

MM: Well they started it, though, at the shrimp restaurant. The St. Augustine fried shrimp. I guess Chris Way at Barnacle Bill's. I don't know if O'Steens had the sauce before he did but it just—I mean they don't have to be—a lot of people like the sauce over there. It's not really hot. It has a decent flavor. But I guess he wanted it just to be able to sell it with the shrimp. But no, they're not—well Lonnice Pomar is Minorcan, that owns O'Steens. And I don't know who he bought O'Steens from. But I think they had it there first. But Chris just went international with it. It's why it's attributed to him more.
AH: When you guys go out to eat, or if you go out to eat do you have a restaurant that you love?

MM: We take our handful of Datil peppers with us everywhere we go [laughs]. We go pick them and he either puts them in his pocket or I put them in a Dixie cup or whatever. Yeah, we do have some favorite restaurants. Black Molly is one of our favorite restaurants.

AH: Oh, and that's pretty new, isn't it?

MM: It is new but they cook with a lot of Datil peppers and they've used—they've won some contests with their recipes. And so we always have Datil peppers and the guys that own it come over, 'you got any extra peppers with you tonight?' We always leave whatever we have leftover, you know, that we didn't eat with them. And then we like to go to Mikado's on occasion and he likes to get the raw tuna. So he takes Datil peppers and he gives them to the sushi chef because he cuts them up all over his raw tuna and he puts a few in his pocket too [laughs].

AH: I love it that you guys take them with you.

MM: We do, everywhere. We're not without them. Now whenever they stop producing, you know, it'll be a few months before we have them again. And I just start craving them in the spring. I could just, "ah, got to have a Datil pepper." And when we get our first ones, what we like to have first with our green ones—of course—we have them all year because they're in vinegar in the freezer but they're not the same as a green one. A fresh one. So the first thing we have with our fresh Datil peppers is a Datil pepper, feta cheese, olive, tomato sandwich. [laughs].

AH: That sounds so good.

MM: We usually have a few little tomatoes growing too, and I toast the twelve grain bread and put the mayonnaise and tomatoes on it and then put the Datil peppers and the feta cheese and the olives: good.

AH: That sounds really good.

MM: It's really good.

AH: And so when you're nearing the last of the season what will you use—do you have a send-off meal—

MM: Not really, no. And then the next big issue—the next big thing is when the potatoes come in and we have fresh baked potatoes and cut the peppers up on them.

AH: How long do they produce? How many months do you have—

MM: The peppers? Um, actually we could probably make these continue to produce for a little while but then the cold kills them. We have had them—we have had some survive from year to year. Some people say the peppers get hotter. I don't think they get hotter. But if you can keep the cold from totally killing them, like keep them inside the garage or something and cut them back—you cut them back just like a rose bush. And then in the spring you can either repot them, or we used to plant them in the ground after they'd been in a pot for the first year. We'd just
plant them in the ground. We’ve kept them as long as seven and eight years. And when you put
them in the ground, they get as high as your head. They get so—the bushes grow so big. We had
one at the farm in Hastings that was like seven years old and I think we picked like four gallons
of peppers off of it in one picking. It was so huge.

AH: And it gets as tall as your head.

MM: Mm-hm. But it takes a lot of effort to keep them alive. Because the first freeze or frost or
really cold, it'll just kill them right down to the ground. They won’t be—they don't survive in
any cold weather.

AH: So y'all's—yours are in pots right now.

MM: They are, mm-hm. And it's so easy to go over there and get new ones we don't even try to
save them any more. But we sure used to.

AH: That would be something, to see one that tall.

MM: Oh, they're huge—they get huge when you put them in the ground because they have all
the—you know, roots can go as far as they need to or want to, to make a big bush.

AH: Does that make them—do they withstand cold better that way?

MM: No, no. You have to cover them and put a light under them. Even though the cold, they'll
die back, if you have them outside you have to cut them back when the cold weather comes. But
you still have to protect that—the stump, because it'll die too if you don't keep it warm enough.
I never have brought one in the house but my brother—one of my brothers lived in Pittsburgh,
Pennsylvania for a while and he took dirt from here and took it up there and planted his peppers
in pots and kept them in the house. But he said they never did really produce any peppers. They
just made bushes and they didn't like it in Pittsburgh [laughs]. I don't blame them either, I don't
blame them at all [laughs].

AH: [Laughs]. Well I don't have any more questions, is there anything that you want to add or
should we talk about something that I didn't touch on?

MM: Um, I don't know anything else except that it's a good thing to have Datil peppers. We
need to get a thing going: 'eat Datil peppers.' But the problem is, unless you just—you can't use
them fresh because they don't last long enough Now there have been times when I have seen
green ones in the grocery store but not very—it's been a long time since I've seen any in there.
Stewart's used to have them on the island [Anastasia Island], they'd have green ones in there.

AH: But they don't sell them anymore?

MM: I haven't been in there lately, but I don't think they are. I don't know. There's some friends
of ours in Hastings right off of [State Road] 206—or they live on 206. You know where South
Woods Elementary School is?

AH: Mm-hm.
MM: OK, if you're going from the east towards 207 on 206, right after you pass the school they live down on the left, and they have a hot house. And they're producing hundreds and hundreds of pounds of peppers every year. I mean every picking. They told me one time how many thousands of pounds they picked last year. And Firehouse Subs buys all of them. They have an exclusive contract with them for all their peppers.

AH: Really?

MM: Yeah.

AH: And just a local Firehouse or—

MM: No the whole big, you know, the corporation.

AH: I had no idea.

MM: Have you ever had their hot sauce at a Firehouse Sub? My daughter bought us a bottle of it one time but it didn't say 'Datil peppers' on the label. But that's been several years ago so I don't know if they listed on there or not. This year we were just craving Datil peppers and ours were still blooming and had little peppers on it so we went by and robbed Chris's—Chris Barnes' hot house. He said, 'I knew you were here.' I said, 'well that's OK, I'll make you a pie. [Laughs] A pecan pie.' He loves that, so we traded [laughs].

AH: That's a great idea [laughs].

MM: So we did get some a little earlier because his were growing in the hot house.

AH: That's amazing. I didn't know they had that wide of a reach besides the Dat'l Do-It—

MM: Oh yeah. Well Dat'l Do-It was international at one time. I don't know if they still are.

AH: I'm not sure.

MM: I know you could go on the website and buy it. We even saw it Albertson's in Wyoming one time. In Cody, Wyoming. There was Dat'l Do-It on the shelf. But that's been a lot of years ago, I don't know if they still ship that far and wide or not. I would guess they would if the, you know, was popular market out other places.

AH: That's kind of neat to see our special little pepper all the way over there.

MM: Yeah, it is. It was pretty cool because we always—we go out and hunt every year and we always take Datil pepper stuff because all of our friends out there love Datil peppers and the only way they could get them—I mean we introduced them to them, and the only way they can get them is when we take them. But I thought it was pretty cool to see Datl Do-It in that Albertson's that one time. I only saw it there once. All the grocery stores have this little limited shelf space they tell you. So maybe nobody knew what it was. I mean there are hundreds and hundreds of hot sauces. You walk in any grocery store, how would you pick one? If you didn't know what it was?

AH: Yeah, and by this point Tabasco and Louisiana are the things that people—
MM: Right. Have you been to the Tabasco place at Avery Island? That's a fascinating place to go to.

AH: Is it?

MM: Yeah, it is. We've been there a couple of times.

AH: Really?

MM: We bought some Tabasco seeds there one year and came home and planted them and I thought, 'my God.' I said, 'I'm never going to get rid of these things.' They were coming up in the rose bushes, pots and everywhere. And they're so tiny, it takes—I said, 'I don't want to pick that many little tiny T-90 peppers. What do you do with them?' So I was cutting them up and putting them in with the Datil peppers. I said, 'no more.' They produce for like three years and I said, 'get them out of here. I'm done with these. I don't want anymore of these things.'

AH: Oh my gosh. Yeah, it's on my to-do list, for sure.

MM: They're not really that—I mean they're OK, Tabasco peppers are, but just like any other peppers they're just hot. They don't have a—and they're not real hot. But they don't have a distinctive flavor like the Datil peppers do.

AH: Mm-hm. Especially once you have some that you love and have gotten to know so well.

MM: Right. Mm-hm.

AH: Well—

MM: Do you want to go out and look at the plants?

AH: That would be great. Thank you so much.

MM: Do you have a plant at your house?

AH: I do.

END 53:38