

Wyatt's Barbecue
September 30, 2021

MARISSA HOWARD: Do you mind just saying your name?

OSCAR WYATT: My name is Oscar Wyatt. We opened this restaurant here at 1674 Memorial Drive forty years ago. My brother and I started this business fifty-five years ago. We started out on Gordon Road. We went to Candler Road [rest of sentence inaudible]. There was five boys and seven girls [inaudible], and the only one left but me. We got this one place now called Wyatt's Diner, but we're well known as Sergeant Wyatt's Country Barbecue, that's our title. And we cook soul food here daily. We sell out daily, and it's been a success for the family. This is Mr. Wyatt talking to you from Wyatt's Diner. And our menu is veggies—is collards, turnips, string beans, black-eyes [peas], macaroni, potato salad, cole slaw, candied yams, rice and gravy, peach cobbler, and sweet potato cobbler and baked beans. Our meats are pork ribs—we specialize in pork ribs, barbecued chicken, chopped pork, stew meat, oxtail, and pig ears and pig feet, and baked chicken and baked turkey wings. That's all the meat on the menu.

MH: I noticed the smokers going. Is this your prep time on Monday morning?

OW: Yes, it is.

MH: For the week or just for the day?

OW: Now, that's for today.

MH: Just for the day?

OW: Just for one day.

MH: Do you sell out completely?

OW: Every day

MH: Is it—so you smoke everything--

OW: Smoke everything, [inaudible]. Everything's cooked on the grill but barbecued chicken and the ribs. Those are cooked in the oven.

MH: Are a lot of the family—is it like a lot of family recipes?

OW: It is a family recipe, yes.

MH: Very secret, I bet.

OW: Yes, it is, very much so.

MH: Is there a lot of cooking in your family?

OW: Yeah, like I said, we've—I'm the family of twelve, five boys and seven girls. We was born in Morgan County, which is Madison, Georgia. But I moved here in Atlanta in 1953. I actually started fooling around with barbecue—when you're talking in the '40s and '50s, when you talk barbecue, you're talking about Joe in Vine City and Ben Reed on Houston Street. Those are the two most famous Black men cooking barbecue. And I started fooling around with Ben Reed on Houston Street cooking barbecue, and I've been doing it ever since. And when my brother retired out of the service, him and I went in business, and we were sitting around one day [inaudible] the name of it, what we was going to name the business. He said, "Well, I'm a retired sergeant, and you're [inaudible]. Why don't we just call it 'Sergeant Wyatt's Country Barbecue?'" That's how we came up with that title. It's been very successful for the family.

MH: And you've been here at this location—

OW: I've been in this location forty years.

MH: Forty years. Is Sergeant Wyatt, is he the pastor [inaudible]?

OW: He was a pastor, yes, he was the pastor. He's dead; all of them's dead except me. I'm the last one of the family.

MH: What's—is there a lot of family still in the business?

OW: Nieces and nephews, yes. We still have a lot of nieces and nephews with the business. We also have one place down in Covington. It's named after one of my sisters, called Mama Lena's Soul Food. That's down in Covington, Georgia. My nephews operates that. And it's all family.

MH: OK. So what was this building—why did you choose this location, this—

OW: Well, actually, a friend of mine owned this property, and it was so small—him and his brother owned this place many, many years ago just for a little hotdog stand. And knowing him, and he said, "Well, it's too small for me and my brother. So if you want it, you can—" he sold it to me, which is Oscar Wyatt. And I ended up, just something [inaudible]. We [inaudible] that's why it's so small and I'll carry y'all [inaudible] a small operation, but it just turned into a large operation, because the food is so good, and everybody fraternize [patronize?] our [inaudible], and thank God that for many years, and that's why we're so successful out here now and been here forty years.

MH: And so you've seen a lot of changes here on this specific corner, too.

OW: Definitely seen a lot of changes.

MH: How do you notice a difference in—

OW: Well, the difference is they've torn down a lot of the old structures and changed out the new structures. Kirkwood used to be, I'll say, 95 percent Black, but now it's 95 percent White, and 5 percent Black, so—but it's still a very successful neighborhood and a good neighborhood to live in. And the Blacks and Whites come here to eat. Everybody comes here to eat from all over the world.

MH: Do you still live—so you live in Kirkwood?

OW: No, I've never lived in Kirkwood. I live in, like I say, I was born in Morgan County in Madison, Georgia. But I live out in Ellenwood, Georgia.

MH: OK. So do you—are you the supervisor over everything now? Do you taste-test everything?

OW: I'm the main cook, and I'm the taste-tester, and that's what I do. I get here at four o'clock in the morning and start cooking. My nephew gets here around six and starts cooking on the grill. My wife and nieces get here around eight, and they start frying and baking, and we go from there.

MH: So do you start the smoker out at—

OW: Four o'clock in the morning.

MH: What kind of—do you do half a hog or whole [inaudible]—

OW: We do hickory wood and charcoal, wood charcoal, not the gas charcoal. Hickory wood and hickory charcoal. Hickory wood charcoal.

MH: Is that the best flavor—

OW: It definitely gives you the best flavor.

MH: Do you do—so is it half a hog do you put on there, and then you pull it, or do you—what kind of—

OW: Well, what we do, we—my brother and I came up with a basting sauce that we came up with forty years ago, and we put our ribs and chicken on the grill, we just baste it with this particular sauce, and that's the way we cook it. Cooks about two hours or a little longer. And it's ready to come off the grill, ready to go in someone's mouth.

MH: What's the sauce based on? Do you have any—you know, there's so many different types of barbecue sauces. What's your—

OW: Well, I got two different sauces. I got the red sauce, I got what you call the “come-back” sauce.

MH: Makes them come back.

OW: That’s the sauce that makes everybody come back. Most people are known for their red barbecue sauce that goes on the ribs, but we base our sauce [inaudible] that I was telling you about, that my brother and I came up with, on the “come-back” sauce, and it’s got several more—it’s got a lot of vinegar and mustard in it, which is good for you if you eat pork. It really keeps your blood pressure down, helps keep your blood pressure down. So that’s why we’ve been so successful with our meat sauce, because it’s cooked on the grill.

MH: Do you have any hot sauces?

OW: No, we don’t—you mean the barbecue sauce?

MH: Just like a hot sauce—

OW: We can make—my wife came up with a sauce that she mixes up that she can put on your grill or on your barbecue sauce after you put it on your—and it makes it real, real hot for you. But normally it’s just a mild, good hot, good sauce.

MH: What’s—how do you see the future of Wyatt’s?

OW: Well, my brother is, like I say, my brother and I started the business out years ago. And thank God my oldest son and my baby boy is here with me now, and they want to take it to a higher level. We’ve been here just a little small place. I’m eighty years old now, and I’ve been doing this since 1954, and I’m hoping that they take it to a higher level and keep serving our customers barbecue for many, many more years.

MH: More locations or bigger—

OW: We hope to get more locations, but we want to keep it small and lovable, because once you spread out too wide, look like you lose your taste. We don’t want to ever lose the country taste.

MH: Do you do a lot of catering?

OW: We don’t a lot of full catering. We don’t set up full catering, but a lot of people call us and want us to fix large pans of food for them, and we do that. And we put it in pans for them, and they come pick it up.

MH: Do you have a lot of repeat customers that have been coming for years?

OW: We've had repeat customers for forty years. We've had customers who've come here forty years ago; now their children is coming, and their children is coming. So there've been a repeating customer, probably, since we've opened up.

MH: And you said that people come from all over the world.

OW: All over the globe, yes.

MH: What's the favorite thing that they always come back for?

OW: Most people—well, everything we cook in there, they want it. But we specialize in our ribs.

MH: Ribs, OK.

OW: Ribs and pig ears. People—I've never known people to eat so many pig ears. I can't cook the pig ears fast enough. I sell out of pig ears every day. I just can't say one meat over the other one, because we sell out daily. So they love it all.

MH: What time do you sell out by?

OW: Around seven o'clock. We open at eleven, and by seven it's all gone.

MH: It's all gone. Do you put the ribs on at four also?

OW: We cook about seven or eight cases of ribs a day, so to keep up with the demand, we have to start early to cook them.

MH: So what's your favorite that you—

OW: Well, my favorite, I just love black-eyed peas, myself. I'm comfortable with cornbread and black-eyed peas. But I cook it all. I love turnips [turnip greens], I don't care too much for collards, but I love turnips. Turnips are my favorite vegetables and black-eyed peas. But I eat a rib or two every once in a while.

MH: Do you put the smoked turkey wing in the turnips, or—

OW: No, no, I use the old country-style fat. Country-style fat when I'm cooking my vegetables, except for the lima beans, string beans, and steamed cabbage; they have no meat at all. We don't put meat in them, for the people that don't like meat. But the rest of it is cooked with old country fat.

MH: So what were you—have you changed that because people are now talking more about eating vegetarian, and—

OW: No, we don't change a thing. We haven't changed a thing. We leave it just like it is, and we sell out every day. And so if it's not broke, don't fix it.

MH: Right. So how have you been dealing with covid and maybe the food price increase?

OW: Well, the food prices have increased a lot—it definitely has increased a lot. In the beginning, we get higher [?]. But I try to keep my prices at a minimum because, you know, you go in business to make money. You don't up your prices when you [inaudible] so high that you buy, you won't be in business long that way. We try to keep our prices at a minimum, and we give you a good portion of food. Matter of fact, we sell large portions of food. We give you enough for your money, and that's very important. People don't mind paying for what they get. And we do give them a lot of portions for their money.

MH: Has it been OK, since it's mostly a take-out, during the—

OW: Actually we're [inaudible] speaking, it's been a blessing for this place right here, because it was all carry-out from number one, and after covid came in, we couldn't seat anybody, which I wasn't seating anybody anyway, so it's been a blessing. It really has helped my business, being all carry-out.

MH: So when is—so Miss Ann has been here—

OW: Miss Ann's been [inaudible] for about fifty years.

MH: --for a long time, too.

OW: For a long time.

MH: But she's passed.

OW: She's passed, and [inaudible]. And her brother and her sister didn't want to be bothered with it, they [inaudible] for a while after she got real sick. And after she passed and the covid came out, it just gave them [inaudible] dispose of it. So it doesn't exist anymore right now.

MH: Has that been hard to see someone else that's been here for so long—

OW: Yes, it's been very hard. I knew her very well. Me and her was very good friends, and I hated to see the business go like that. But, like I said, her brothers and sisters, I think they're all [inaudible] they retired from the government rest of comment [inaudible].

MH: So a family of twelve, that must have been a lot of food at the table, like trying to keep up with that— *[Both speak at once; difficult to discern one thread.]*

OW: Well, [inaudible] it was [inaudible] being the baby of the family—if you want to call an eighty-year-old man a baby—but—

MH: [Inaudible] the youngest youngest?

OW: I'm the youngest youngest. We was raised up in the country. My mother and father was sharecroppers, and we had plenty of food. We had everything we needed. We raised all our food. We had a large garden, we had hogs, we had cattle, we had everything that you would need in the country that people would have. So none of us went hungry, I'll put it that way. And we'd always—my daddy had enough food and enough garden, big enough garden, and chickens on the yard and hogs, to share with the whole neighborhood. That's what we did back in the day. [Inaudible comment] That's what we did.

MH: Were you preserving a lot, like, from the summer, the harvest and [inaudible] for the winter?

OW: Yeah, we harvest—my mother, we had a syrup mill, which my daddy would make syrup, when we grind the cane, sugar cane—grind it in the syrup mill. And my mother had a lot of fruit trees. And she would can her fruit and preserve them for the winter. And that's the way we made it.

MH: Do you feel like your restaurant is sort of keeping the sort of legacy of food—

OW: Oh, [inaudible]. Like I say, I cook country, and people love it. That's why we've been so successful. It's still—I use the same recipes like my mother used. And I wouldn't change a thing.

MH: Well, I'm smelling the stuff already, so it must be—

OW: It'll be eleven o'clock, they'll be lining up.

MH: So every day it's the same—

OW: Every day is the same.

MH: Well, thank you so much for your time.

OW: You're very welcome.

MH: So what we're trying to do is we are trying to get oral histories for our collections, and we would love to share this. And also part of this will be in our library and archives, so other people years from now can look this up and research it and see it. And we'll transcribe it, too.

OW: [Inaudible] a lot of information.

MH: Sure, and if you know anyone else that would love to talk--

OW: [Inaudible] find anybody [inaudible], I'll be glad to talk to you.

MH: OK—and one other thing, could you repeat your name?

OW: Oscar Wyatt

MH: Oscar Wyatt

OW: We're known as Sergeant Wyatt's Country Barbecue.

MH: Sergeant Wyatt's Country Barbecue

OW: That's right.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by CS