HIST 6384: Oral History
Fall 2010

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
A Taste of Houston

A Part of the Culinary Crossroads Project
UH Center for Public History

Interviewee:	Monica Pope
Interview Date:	November 2, 2010
Place:	*t'afia* (Houston, TX)
Interviewer:	Matthew Campbell
Transcriber:	Matthew Campbell

Keywords: Monica Pope, *t'afia*, Midtown Farmers Market, Urban Harvest, farmers market, food sustainability, cooking, organic, recycling, community, family.

Abstract:

Monica Pope was interviewed to gain knowledge of the farmers markets of Houston. She talked about her involvement with the Midtown Farmers Market and food sustainability. Issues facing participants and restaurateurs are discussed. She also raises her own concerns with the future of community and food. This interview supplements another interview with Monica Pope conducted on November 4, 2010, by Amy Breimaier.

She was interviewed on November 2, 2010 at *t'afia*, 3701 Travis Street, Houston, TX 77002. The interview was conducted by Matthew Campbell on behalf of the Oral History of Houston Project, Center for Public History, University of Houston. The interview is available at the M.D. Anderson Library on the main campus of the university.

MC: This is Matt Campbell and I am interviewing Monica Pope. It is November 2nd [2010], 10:05am and we are interviewing at her restaurant *t'afia*. Can you go ahead and state your name.

MP: This is Monica Pope

MC: Ok. And, just a couple of short questions. Where did you grow up — I know that you didn't grow up here, but-

MP: Oh I did. I actually was born in Germany when my dad was in the army. So '62, my brother was about '63. We came back here — uh, and this is the only home I've known.

MC: Okay.

MP: So I was just gone for a couple of years. My dad was in kind of an R-O-T-C thing, and you know.

MC: So did you go to school here?

MP: I did, I went to James Bonham Elementary, Spring Woods Junior High, Memorial High School.

MC: Okay.

MP: And I went away for about 9 or 10 years — college in Baltimore and Europe and California.

MC: Okay. What did you study when you were in college?

MP: I was an English literature major with an emphasis in creative writing at Goucher College [Baltimore, Maryland]. At the time it was an all girls school and — and then I did quite well, if I do say so myself. And um, they are still using my thesis [chuckles] at the college, but then I went away — for a long time. I was travelling in Europe for almost three years —

MC: So when did you come back here to Houston?

MP: So I came back about two months before the '89 earthquake in San Francisco — and I opened my first restaurant in 1992. So — technically when I got back, that was I — I went away and I always said I was going to come back to Houston, open a restaurant and change the way Houston eats.

MC: So when did you first know that you wanted to be involved with food? Was that at a young age or —

MP: Yeah, I was a teenager and I had been swimming all my life since I was six. I woke up one day as a sixteen year old or something, and — felt like [pausing] my grandmother had did a lot of special things with —. She was from Kansas and Czechoslovakian and there —. We were the urban grandkids you know. So for my perspective, it was like — shit, my mother had two sisters and there were a dozen grandkids. So it was like who knows how to do this. So my initial interest was in kind of going back to my roots and worked with my grandmother and learned how to do certain things that she did for the entire family and would send us in a box. I spent my junior summer and the summer after my senior year of high school working with her in Kansas. That was my initial interest but even after that experience — and I had — eased out of swimming a little bit and started cooking more healthy for myself, cause I was always, sort of, ten pounds overweight. And um — and ultimately, I look back — I realize I was trying to get back to my family and you know have — bring them together with food and I started doing parties for my family. They were art collectors and stuff like that, so in a lot of different ways I was just sort of wanting to — bring my family together and have them together with me and maybe sitting at a table, because I was just swimming all the time.

MC: What — if you don't mind me asking, what do you have like — what is your earliest memory of food or that you were involved with, like with your grandmother or with your family?

MP: Well I mean literally the — what I write about is this box that my grandmother would send us as — you know, my mother's birthday was in October we would get maybe something in October, something for the holidays. So my grandmother would make kolaches and shishki and _____ and that kind of stuff. It was really- it was for us being in Houston, being Southwest Houston it was kind of special — so it was like "wow, here's a package you know" —

MC: Right —

MP: Umm…And in some ways a lot of what I still do around here has some connection to where I came from. Whether its poppy seeds or the shishkis kind of like gnocchi. I have a kind of like a lot of attractions to food like that — that kind of comforting eastern European beets and different things but um… [pausing]

You know I didn't — I didn't spend a lot of time with my— I mean we would go the odd holiday, every other holiday — a bunch of us — we loved— but we would get this box you know.

Uh, my mother was a good cook, but she was a cook from the seventies and she had a cafeteria with a family of six. It was good food but it was this seventies things — happened with the canned Campbell Soup and the frozen broccoli and what not. And I was not spending a lot of time at the dining room table unless it was a holiday, cause I was always swimming. My dinner was always left to the microwave oven for me at eight thirty, nine o'clock.

MC: Hm. I guess — I wanted to ask a little bit about the Mid Town Farmer's Market and uh — just how exactly that came about. I guess…uh, if that was just a creation out of the restaurant or if that was kind of predetermined — that you wanted to do that—

MP: I always say that it was not part of the business plan [laughing] but it ended up making…*t'afia* makes sense…and making what I've been trying to do for years, kind of happen. Um, you know, historically speaking I started in ninety-two with my first restaurant the *Quilted Toque* and had some idea in my head when I was a teenager that I'm going to come back to Houston and open a restaurant and change the way Houston eats.

When I opened the *Quilted Toque* — I didn't — really know or I didn't ever really know what that meant, even though I said it to a friend of mine. And I didn't really, um — you know, have a handle on what I was going to do at the *Quilted Toque*. I ended up being reminded, over the last eighteen, or nineteen years, constantly reminded, "Okay wait — [gasp] I was going to change the way Houston — well what does that, what does it mean, what does it mean for me personally, what does it mean for me professionally, what does it mean to my community." You can look back and say, "Oh it's easy, it's Alice Waters, it's like ranchers names, farmers names, and this cheese person and that," but I didn't have any of those connections when I opened my first restaurant, I just did food that I had experienced over my short twenty-eight years all over the world, eating and travelling, and having experiences with my family whether it was in New York or some place. Um, because I did have some access, you know, my parents brought me with them to New York or I ended up going off to Europe for years — but my first restaurant was a reflection of where I was at the time, which was stealing from all sorts of people —

MC: Right...

MP: There were a few, um I think, turning points, back then — One of them was at the *Quilted Toque* when Tim Keating [executive chef at the Four Season Hotel in Houston] and Robert DelGrande [Co-owner of Houston's Café Annie and the Houston-based Café Express chain] asked me to come and sign something which is the Chef's Collaborative preamble — statement of principles. Which is kind of the Americanized version of Slow Food [Slow Food International], which now — Slow Food is here, but back then Alice Waters and a few chefs went off to Hawaii and created kind of this Chef's Collaborative thing — I was like, "Oh, maybe that's why I'm here [lightly laughing] maybe that's what it was."

Uh, there was another pivotal moment when Urban Harvest um, asked — somebody asked me — Boulevard Bistro which, *Quilted Toque* was nineteen ninety-four, so ninety-four, to ninety-five — Urban Harvest asked if I would host this thing in my restaurant on a Monday.

It turned out the first time, um, farmers and growers and different people got together with chefs and then got together with regular people, you know. It like literally, was like the first time this has ever happened in the history of Houston, Texas. That's how they look back on it — "Do you remember that day, Monica?" I'm like well I do, but I didn't realize how significant it was to them, and then to me. So around ninety-five, we're like "Oh, so now I know a couple of growers." [laughing] And I started putting them on the blackboard and what not. Um, you know — a couple years later somebody says, "Hey, we're doing a study to see if we can bring back a farmer's market to market square." And it just like, their going to pay some consultant I don't know how many thousands of dollars to feasibility — you know, do a feasibility study, and it's just like, "Okay, great, y'all do that — we have a restaurant to run." I mean we were totally supportive and encouraging, but like–we–we don't need to do this ourselves. So they looked into, of course nothing ever happened, and I guess it was about eight or nine years ago, I was at Boulevard Bistro — um, these two women came to me, and now I can't remember the one, but one of them is uh — well, I can't remember either one of them — uh, one of them is still around. But these two women started essentially Houston Farmer's Market, nine years ago, they were at Onion Creek and they came to me, sat with me, and said, "Hey — would you join us?" And I was like, "thank God somebody else did it — yes I'll join you." And I actually couldn't join immediately. I had a funeral — it was actually uh, on my mother's side. And I came back and I started going to the Houston Farmers Market with my stuff —

MC: And where was that located?

MP: At Onion Creek.

MC: Okay.

MP: Nine, let's say nine years ago. And uh, as will happen with Monica Pope when I show up suddenly I get all the credit for whatever is there. So we hadn't gotten a review yet. So we did that for a long time, well actually we did it almost for a year, I started probably May or June. It might have been June — I think the funeral was in May. It may have started in maybe in April and I started in June, and we got almost to December and the city — there was the city of Houston had no way for you as a farmers market to get certified. So, and then there was some in-fighting with the people who started that market and different people who were on the board or whatever, there was just a little bit of in-fighting and I was like, I was about to open this and um, I was like, "I don't need this." [chuckling] "I got to go open a restaurant, I'm not going to fight the city and I'm not going to fight the farmers market," so I walked away and a few other people had to walk away, too. They came to me, uh, so this is like December, so by the time we opened *t'afia*, which was February of that next year. You know three months later I had a farmer come to me and say, "Monica, you know, why can't y'all do the farmers market inside of *t'afia* because you're not open during the day?" And we weren't doing any days, we were just doing five nights. And uh, get around the fact that the prepared food

vendors don't have a permit that they can get to do something outside, you know that was the issue. When you're outside under a tent or on hard concrete, or whatever, you have to have access to bathrooms, you know you have to have a certain permit. "Okay, Gita, if you get us certified, you know, and I figured she wouldn't [laughing] she kind of a bit of a procrastinant," but I thought, "Okay, yeah you that, you work on that Gita, and then we'll do that," and I'll be darned she got us the Midtown Farmers Market certification and a week after *t'afia* opened the Midtown Farmers Market thing happened.

MC: And when was this that everything —

MP: So, February of two thousand and I think — uh, three, I think. And in my mind on some level it was a stopgap. Ok we can't get a permit yet but we can now operate, cause none of us wanted to stop, we loved it, it was great — kind of exciting time like it is now, down at city hall. It was like, "woooo, we're hoppin' you know." Um, but, um, so Houston Farmers is still going but I can't participate, because now they're mad at me. I'm here doing Midtown Farmers Market — um, and it makes *t'afia* make sense, you know it's like, "Oh my God, you mean this _____" you know because I do this local market tasting menu. I was the first person in the city to ever do something like that were you don't just a chefs tasting menu you have a local market taste menu. All this stuff is from the local farmers market. And about a year into it, Bayou City opened, that's Urban Harvest, they got mad at me because they thought, "Why are you still doing Midtown Farmers Market?" and I was like — and none of us are sitting down talking [gasp].

MC: Right —

MP: Its just all this back and forth like, "you know you said that — you — why are you doing that"— I'm like, "now I can't stop because it makes everything — everything makes sense, so lets just keep doing it. Lets make commitments to these people —." They opened Bayou City (off of Eastside). We've all spent the last eight years, which there are, you know, markets, uh, farmers market assessments that is takes eight years to quote un-quote "grow a market." You have some sort of solidity and consistency — and all that stuff. And it has taken essentially that long, but at any given time things get diluted, people get distracted, and the grass is always greener — you know.

MC: Right —

MP: It's been a challenge to keep the focus, and keep everybody — I think being an honest farmers market. Um, Urban Harvest went through a challenging time the last four or five years, Mark Bowen's the head of that. Midtown Farmers Market has been through really hard times. We are what we are but I'm looking to re-envision that, uh, in the next year. We — I've been perfectly honest, I was like, I'm not even sure if I wanna be a farmers market, with the tents and the tables and the, you know stipulations that it's got to be this or that. I actually think I wanna just do something different [laughing] that still supports and promotes local food and artisans, and stuff like that. But, I think I want to be

different. City Hall I just joined, that's Urban Harvest, um it's a great opportunity. You have fifteen hundred people on a Wednesday day coming out going, "Hey, you know, were downtown we got [gasp] — we got nothing, we got tunnels, we got a fast food place — this is cool."

You know so all of us have joined that as hard as it is to take the marketing opportunity to say, "okay, let's be real," the bar, even Mark will tell you at Urban Harvest, the bar is being raised down there. It's like where's the food court, you know situation, versus a real farmers market, what does that look like? What is the stipulations, what's the standard, you know, that's what we're dealing with right now.

MC: And let me ask you, I guess, just to kind of clarify — could you explain, I guess, uh, what is exactly involved in a farmers market. I mean who are the people that are bringing it and what is, I know you talked about kind of having to be a certified farmers market, what is involved —

MP: Well there is a certification that you can get, and I don't know all the details, Gita got that done, Andrew who just left manages that permit, everybody that participates has to have a manufacturers permit or license, which just mean I make this at this place, this way, and package it and keep it this way.

MC: So does everyone who brings things to the farmers market have that?

MP: —Well the produce vendors, um I'm not sure, what they—I think—they just have kind of an added value permit that they have to get if they're going to do stuff like that, but if they're selling zucchinis the concept is you have some connection with that farm.

You—uh, work on that farm, you're the son, or the daughter of the uncle or the whatever, there is some connection, that you know, you're not just — reselling stuff.

MC: Right.

MP: That's the main issue with people, that the parameters, a hundr—we were discussing this yesterday, a hundred and eighty miles, not further than, —

MC: Than this location—

MP: Yeah that's the self-created parameter. I think Texas is such a big state, that what's the difference between the extra twenty miles [laughing], you can get to Austin and you can get some different stuff or whatever, ok what's sustainable. In terms of you know everybody's standard of who does really, good stuff, and who does [gasp] who's conventional, who does, you know, good grass fed beef or pork, or like whatever. That fluctuates. Then you have all the prepared food vendors, so what's the standard now. What's happen the last eight years is nothing. I mean I get pissed off, because it's like, certain people go off to Costco or Wal-Mart buy the cheapest part they can buy, make

chicken salad or whatever it is, sell it at a farmers market. What do you think? You think, "oh, I'm buying from a local," where did you get your chicken, where did you get your eggs, whatever it is. And so now what's happening is all of us are clamping down, not wait a minute, did you really grow this stuff, are you supporting the local economy? Your local chicken guy, your local pork guy, whatever, whatever you're doing is there some local. By extension I try to do organic and fair trade, and obviously seasonal, but a lot of people don't. I think people come to the farmers market thinking everything is organic or fair trade, but it not necessarily—

MC: —And so in fact its really not.

MP: —That's not necessarily the case, uh and there's—everybody has to have full disclosure. There's one farm that is clearly a conventional farm versus so-and-so over here who's small scale you know certified organic property, ok farm. I've always said it's not—organic is not the end all, be all—

MC: Okay.

MP: Small scale. Local first, and then after that—take your chances with anybody in Mexico or California, Florida or whatever. It's like my first choice is going to be local. The local guy, not because it's cheaper, not but ideally because it's fresher, and because on some level you know that person, you have a relationship with that person. You trust that person; um you know the first choice, the first choice, whatever it is, whether it's the cheese I buy, the wine that I buy or you know the bread, is that guy from here? Do I know that guy? Even Heath [Heath Wendell; owner and operator of Slow Dough Bread Company] who's Slow Dough obviously coffee and chocolate and flour doesn't necessarily come from right here, but do I know that guy? Is he baking it at two o'clock in the morning, yeah I want my money to go to that guy, not to the big giant corporation that comes out of—you know wherever.

MC: So do you—

MP: We're trying to figure out what that looks like and we're trying actually encourage, and coax certain prepared food vendors to go the way of fifty-one percent orga—local or if you're doing chicken salad, that main ingredient should be local. If your gonna do pimento cheese, that main ingredient should be local, not "oh yeah, I put some chives in there." [laughing] Its like — if you're gonna do egg salad or quiche, or a sandwich—. We had a guy, who the first day at city hall— Mark walked by these like — "dude what are you doing." Like a Philly cheese steak and he's like, "Oh, my bad" you know its like okay—w—wo, it's a local farmers market, we're happy you're here, yes we're happy that you're doing some neat stuff, but a Philly cheese steak, at least use local meat, call it something else for God's sake, you know, it's a local farmers market. I told them when they started, I said, "hey, you go for it." Uh, Laura [Laura Spanjian; City of Houston Sustainability Director] was a friend of mine, she's with the mayor, and I was like, "it is

gonna be a food court, but it better be an honest one." And so everything we're trying to do out there whether its Ryan Pera, Revival Meats, or Monica Pope from green plum, you know any of these people, lets at least be directly supporting your local vendors and let that customer say, "wow, I love your redneck cheddar pimento cheese Monica, and who is _____ _____ [Stuart Belhaven?] from— you know and where can I go find his cheese, —you know what I mean, because we have got to connect the dots here on our little food chain that we have.

MC: So do you have personal, I mean you know everyone that comes to the Midtown Farmers Market, that is you have personal relationships with all of those people, or do you at least know them on a pretty well off basis.

MP: Yeah, yeah, yeah, we do, we do, but we always get more and more people like, "hey I'm interested can I come, do this, can I bring this," you know and all of us who try to manage markets, it's a management issue. Now, I have so many just sending emails saying, "I have these Brazilian limes, can I come to the market?" No, I gotta go out there and check and make sure that the Brazilian limes are actually in her backyard, and how is that grown. You know you have to step into trusting people at some point, and then you find out, you know there have been people that you found out, they're out there, and you're like, "why is this sticker on here?" Because they bought it from some cheap Vietnamese grocery store and just resold it, at a higher market, you know, at the farmers market. It's like wow. It's unfortunate — it really is, and it's frustrating and its been very challenging. The farmers market just happened to me remember, I was open to and I said sure go — but now I have to deal with it? I actually am a chef and a restaurateur [laughing] first and foremost. Yes, Midtown Farmers Market is the greatest marketing scam in the world, you know what I mean. But it's kind of like, wow who would have thought — nobody thought, somebody just had to solve a problem, and then I was like okay — and then damn she did it, you know. It's been great but how do I continue to work in that world and make it something that I can stand behind, you know. I've had great, great, interesting farmers over the last eight, nine, ten years, that do really good work, and really stunning stuff and inspired and motived — it gets me excited about stuff, and then there is the Joe Shmo who — I always pick on yellow squash, 'cause you know, it's, like it's yellow squash. But the reality is, if it's done right and it's done with the right intention, again it's business 101 you have to not just plant it, not just grow it, you have to sell it, you have to market it. We were talking about city hall saying, "God, did you see David _____, fantastic, and did you see Gita, you know she was unhappy, but yeah look how she presented her stuff," you know what I mean. We have to now deal with how people present their product. Do they get excited about it, are the passionate about it, do they do a good job, planting it and harvesting it at the right time? Did they grow the right mix of stuff, or are they stuck with — something nobody wants to buy. You know David had the unusual winged beans, like a little — it was an interesting thing. Who knew, I mean who knew, but it was just like, "shoot, I'm going to buy a pound for four bucks, you know, just as a chef I want to try it." Everybody is different you know.

MC: Most of the people who come when you have the farmers market, as customers, what do you think they are looking for in general. Is it that they are looking for a certain type of food or is it a community.

MP: I think it's — they buy into this sort of community thing, and again I'm — I get very, very — depressed and frustrated with — the mentality. Let's say there are — there are a few people I can count on my hand that say, "wow Monica, I'm doing everything local, I feel better, I've lost eighty pounds, and this is the right way to eat." We tell people, just start with two local meals a week, you know, you'll save the world; you'll improve your health and the quality of your life. That is all we ask, just start breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But I think some people come and their like, "this is cool, this is great, you know this is like the new hang out scene, I saw a friend I hadn't seen in twenty years." And this is Houston the fourth largest city in the country? So obviously, yes we've lost in the last ten years, I'm almost fifty, you know the last ten years we've lost the sense of community, we've lost that little main street we go down, that general store, that's where we get all of our information, that where we connect with everybody. You know, of course everybody goes to the general store. This is what this acts as, our little general store, basically. But they come in here sometimes and just turn off and say, "oh great I can do whatever I want here because it's a farmers market." And it's like no, it still has to be the right choice, in some ways. Everybody along the chain has to make the right choice. Does this feel good to me? You know as frustrating as it is, people think, "oh you're the arbiter of all things local, and organic and sustainable." Okay, I'm just interested in the relationship. Is it somebody that I like, that I can support, that I can get behind, and that they can work with me, and I feel good about it. Like when I make chicken salad, I feel good. Like it gets my goat if I have to go some place else and spend my money with somebody else. I don't want to — I actually want to spend it right here in this little community, that is my food community. People just go, "really, this person is here?" Yes they are right here. But you have to make that effort, you have to make that choice, to say where is this money going to go. I still go to Central Market, or Whole Foods to get certain things; it's just the way it is. But it's like the first, first choice is a person that I know in this community trying to do something just to take care of themselves and their property and their little community — I mean this world is way too big, crazy, and dysfunctional.

MC: Do you see that as a trend, I mean I think I've read some statistic that said that organic farming is kind of on the up, with just health craze right now and things like that—.

MP: I think definitely, it keeps growing. I mean you saw, whatever it was 3500 farms now, you know, 5500 farms, 8500 farms — yes its obviously growing markets in the last eight years. Probably we have — probably — twenty to twenty five now. Eight years ago, it might have been half a dozen, it might have been three, I don't know.

MC: And that's just here in —

MP: Just in Houston — Humble, Kingwood, and Clear Lake, and every time you turn around, there is a new one. Um, is it real, you know? Is it literally three tents and somebody selling Tuscan olive oil [laughing] in one? Or is it just the same prepared food vendors that do twenty-eight farmers markets all over the state. Is it that market, or is it actually, you know, an honest farmers market. There is constant, constant political stuff and egos, and stuff going back and forth. You know I heard somebody complaining about Urban Harvest, and I have had my own issues with Urban Harvest, and I've tried to kind of evolve and move through that beyond that, and people have had their issue with me, but — um, you know — [breaking]. A farmer [laughing] — you know. In the end, what it has to do with for me, and this is what's even more depressing and frustrating, cause you can have a bunch of farmers markets open up, and that's great on some levels. But what's happening there, the main issue — each one of us and our family, what are we doing? Are we cooking? Are we sitting down to the table? Are we sharing stories, are we talking to one another — because we've lost all of that? We choose to go do the fast food thing, we choose to go get a bunch of prepared food at the farmers market and still not cook with our families and sit down, you know, and really appreciate where the food comes from. We don't really care where it comes from, you know, ultimately. Um, and so, long story short, I'm trying to evolve what I do at Midtown Farmers Market, and do something else, which is, you know — what I can do. All I can do is say, "okay am I'm not going to do the farmers market anymore per se, but I'm going to do what I do," which is try, desperately try, to get people into to cooking again, with their families, which each other, with me, I don't care [laughing]. Cook. Tell stories. And really appreciate what we have here, because we could lose it, we could lose it and never ever have it again. We've already lost what fifty, forty, fifty, sixty percent of our biological diversity. That's what we're talking about, we're talking about, if you keep deciding that you want to go back to Whole Foods and buy the tomatoes year round, and not support Joe Shmo, who came here with twenty different varieties, that he had for one month of the year, and say "let's go," and you keep doing that —. I talked to people all the time, one guy was leaving after a four hour diatribe by Monica Pope. It's like, "well you know those raspberries at Wal-Mart are really good," and I was just like, "Oh my God — thanks for just knocking, hobbling me at my front door." I said, "Did you know where they came from —." "Well no." So that's your choice, they sure were good, and who gives a shit where they come from.

MC: I've seen on your website that you offer cooking classes, is that kind of birthed out of that?

MP: Yeah that was two, almost three years ago after Ike [Hurricane Ike] I felt like I talked the talk as a chef and a professional, but as a mommy of my daughter who's almost six at the time, now she's eight, we didn't sit down to the table too often. Somebody asked me, "does she see you cook?" She knows what I do, but does she see you cook? And I was like — . Does she see you eat? That was the other thing, I don't know if she ever sees me eat, you know, because my schedule obviously was very different from hers. It would be like, "honey, go order something from Louise, then sit there and eat and go home, I have got to work tonight." So I changed my personal life as much as I could. I started a

free class at nine thirty, at the farmers market. Not just, I figured if it was for me and my daughter, there would be other people interested. I needed to know that in less that an hour, I could go out and get some turnips and some beets and go up stairs and cook in front of forty or fifty people, an in less than an hour produce something that was really, really good. But I don't cook that way, what I've been doing for twenty years is kind of different, it's changed since the farmers market, it really has changed because of the quality ingredients cause they're there, there in my front yard basically twice a week, and I'm like, "Okay, maybe I don't need to do it this way, but maybe I need to do it this way." So I started doing really simple, simple stuff, and telling stories up there and talking, and making people feel comfortable and laughing and I never left the table, and when I go off and do cooking classes and I go behind the scene, you know, "tada," they're like "no!" They are like, "well what did you just do?" Well you just saw me, I put the turnips in the pot, it was like forty-five minutes later, you know it was like smash, smash, butter, salt, and they're like "those are unbelievable." It was those kind of epiphanies that I needed to have for myself as a home cook in my mind, and also extend that to you know my customers and prove to them that it's pretty darn easy if you can wake up on a Saturday morning, or a Tuesday and you can go buy a couple of things from the market.

You know, my daughter started helping by the fifth class, like can I peel a carrot? We just started a garden at home, you know, "Can I help mom?" We did a big salad last night, she doesn't want to eat that stuff, but I think that she has got an interesting relationship with food right now, that's good, and she ask herself after the cucumber. She wanted to help with the cucumber, she ask, "mommy, what comes first the pickles or the cucumbers?" So she starting to ask the right questions, she knows where it comes from a little bit more, because we have the garden, we have the farmers market, you know we make stuff. But she'll connect the dots over time, but she like many other kids choose this, or this, or this.

MC: Do you feel that the cooking classes you have done have been successful, I mean have heard from people who have been in them, that there is this idea of community and closeness?

MP: I think there are obviously success stories. I can tell you that there are people that just go, "hey, I…" some people make commitments to try to come every single Saturday, to build the repertoire, to watch me on a Saturday and then reproduce on a Sunday. You know there was real conscious effort, like we're going to do this. Like there were a few people, a few years ago, that you know, "I'm going to do every recipe in Julia Child you know and write about it". And the similar thing is like, "I'm going to come to Monica's classes, and I'm going to learn how to cook a turnip if it kills me." Not everybody likes everything but some people go, "I still do that lentil salad, I still do that carrot dish, I would have never looked at the carrot dish twice and when I see local carrots, I'm like oh lets go do…" I know that it did impact — it's been frustrating of late because I feel like in some ways it's what happened to us, we just want to watch TV food. We just want to watch TV – Food Network. We want to watch the drama unfold. You know, how do they do that? We don't really actually want to cook. I've had an entire class where — and I

tell people it's fine, y'all can talk over me, and you can not listen, and not pay attention, that's fine — by the end of the class if they don't connect. Somebody made a comment after one of my classes, cause nobody was listening, they're like, "well what was that green or whatever?" And I said, "it was secret garden, it was whatever", and I was piecing it together, and this woman in front said, "well you can get arugula anywhere." Okay I don't do this free class so that you can buy arugula anywhere; I do this class to say if I've done it, it came from this local market. And this guy right here, why are you people sitting here, if your going to get up and leave the market — because I've had this experience too, where it's like all my quote unquote friends are like, "oh no I forgot to — and the market's over." It's like you've been sitting here socializing all morning and you actually didn't go out and support one of those guys, by buying, I don't care if it's a pound of arugula. So that's the frustration — it's just like oops, forgot why I was here. It was a whole bunch of other things.

MC: I guess I could sort of switch subjects a little bit. I wanted to ask you if you could define the idea of food sustainability and just how you fit into food sustainability.

MP: Right, I have a whole list because I did a talk with a group that wanted to talk about sustainability, and in my own sort of bastardized way every single decision that I've made essentially, let's say since I came to *t'afia* — basically *t'afia*, I had to move, I couldn't continue where I was and at that point we had done ten years of effort to do what Monica's dream was, which was to change the way Houston eats or whatever. So when I moved over here I had a lot of big decisions I could make. You know I could say, "Okay maybe now I can be that restaurant that I wanted to be twenty years ago." Maybe now I can really support — now we have a farmers market, because when I did this we had Houston Farmers Market. Now I have a farmers market, so I made a decision to do local market tasting, you know so every single decision. We filtered water. We've always had living wages. We recycle everything and have been for years, ourselves. Our biodiesels, fryer oil becomes biodiesel.

[There is a short interruption in the interview when Monica is speaking to one of her employees.]

Um, I mean the list goes on, and on, and on. Living wages, this sort of schedule that we have, five nights, you know we do two weeks paid vacation every year, you know we all shut down. That's a big, huge — that not an American culture thing, you know, its more of European, people are just like, "what the heck, you know." [laughing] And it's like yeah it's a big deal. It's a paradigm shift of what is really important. It's important that we come in and worked the best shifts, five of them, the best shifts that we can work, we go home and we have our families. We don't work double, triple jobs. I mean these people Bengi for one, and Maria started with me almost twenty years ago working two jobs, morning, noon and night. I don't know how they raised their families; I don't know how they ever spent any time with them. It's not like that anymore, they stayed with me I've committed to them and we — it's not — maybe it comes from me, but it's responded to by them by like, "hey this works for me." It doesn't work for everybody. There are

people that want money in their pocket and go, go, go and I'll work twenty-eight shifts. You know, "I don't care about my quality of life. I don't care about my family or my relationship," or any of that stuff personally.

In terms of the plate, we went from a starch-protein-veg thing to a starch or a veg and a protein. So we took a third of the plate off and said, "let's make it more sustainable. Let's do a sustainable portion of six ounces." And the biggest portion I have is a bison rib eye that's like ten to twelve. You know like it's twelve ounces, by the time it's cooked it's a ten ounce portion. That's not standard out there. I have other chefs go, "well Monica, my customers won't take less than eight ounces, nine, ten…" and guess what happens — it gets thrown away.

Recycling containers, which we've been doing for years that are not cheap. You know people bring them back to us. I mean it's just a slew of things, but the main thing is just at every juncture you're asking yourself, "is it sustainable?" Because you still have to be a viable company, you have to make money, and be able to stay in business. But every relationship you have, does it work to finish a cycle of waste? Or something that you are producing — does it come back, somehow in a good way?

MC: Do you have any specific stories with anyone that you know personally or that you deal with in sustaining? I know you said that you have biodiesel in use. I didn't know if you had any specific story.

MP: Yeah, well, just tons of them, you know just in terms —

MC: Or one that you would like to share, I guess —

MP: I mean um, — I mean take Chris [Chris Powers of Houston Biodiesel] for example. Years and years ago, I've been here for almost eight years, so let's say six or seven years ago, probably. He came to me and he had a station in the Heights, you know a biodiesel station and he explained that he could put a barrel out there, and I would just pour my oil in there, cause he would take it periodically and turn it into fuel for his car and his truck. And I asked about my own truck, you know all these things. It was not a huge commitment on my part, it was like, "great, somebody doing this." All I have to do is get the guys to pour the stuff in the barrel. He came to me about six months ago or he emailed and he said, "hey I'm going get you a new barrel, it's a new one, a different one, it's going to be better for…whatever, and I'm going to also start paying you because there is some competition out there, and other people are doing this." And I was like, "Chris — no, you were doing this long before anybody else, you don't have to pay me anything, that is ridiculous." And he was like, "thank you." It was this kind of thing like now everybody is jumping on board, but ten, fifteen years ago when all of us were trying to do this, it's like there was nobody making money off of it. You know there was some sustainability in it that people felt strongly about, "well where is this stuff going?" If somebody else will take it, thank you, please, you know run your car on it, compliments

of me. You know what I mean? It's this kind of thing — there are a lot of people in it now for money, you know in it for money.

People that work their butts off — for instance we have been recycling ourselves for years. The mayor had to — I had to write two letters to the mayor to let us, let us do it ourselves cause the city doesn't do it. Now the city has got a system, you know the scanning and the stuff. Mark [Culver] from Yes We Can came to me, it was probably a year ago, a year and a half ago. I didn't need to pay somebody fifty bucks an hour, fifty bucks a month to do this, my guys are doing it, you know. In some ways they hate it, but they are doing it. But I said I want to support this guy, and of course I pay fifty bucks and everybody else pays a hundred and fifty dollars. My garbage bill used to be a hundred and seventy-eight dollars, you know twelve years ago. So okay fifty bucks, I didn't need to do that but I did it because it's like, "I want this guy to actually succeed, I want more and more restaurants —." Cause they're not going to do what I did for ten years and take their truck and take it down to Wesleyan and get the mayor to let me do it. They are going to go whatever, and throw it in the garbage can. So I pay Mark and he shows up. I just talked to a guy yesterday who does cardboard and plastic — and he was like, "Monica, I've never missed a day." And I'm like I hear you; you know really, that speaks volumes to me, too. Never miss a day, he does the cleaning services as well, so he connected to the business, you know cleaning the kitchens at night. He says, "every single day we come and pick up the cardboard," and I'm like wow, cool.

Now it's guys like that — it's a dirty, dirty business, but they are in it because they think it's right. The city is starting to get behind all these sort of sustainable things, you know Laura [Laura Spanjian of Downtown Houston Vegetable Contain Garden Project] that the whole point of doing the container garden, the victory garden, and the city hall thing. She did the rainwater capture thing; recently we all got half off of our composting bins and our rainwater. This is now the city saying let's get ahead of the curve here, but that has not been the case in the last twenty years.

MC: Right. It's interesting, it kind of all a community thing. It's very interesting. I guess before we finish, do you have anybody — well let me ask you this, how do you think your gender has played a role in all of these, and being a woman. I know that a —

MP: It's a bitch is what it is.

MC: I know that is a hard question, but I guess just have you been met with any difficulties or has it been rather easy?

MP: Oh no, no, no. It's horrible, it's absolutely horrible. I mean from day one, twenty years ago when I opened my first restaurant the applications would come across and be, "your wife's name." The assumption is that it's a man running this business. I mean people, all the time my daughter laughs cause people say, "yes sir," to me, and it's like why did they — baby they're not looking very clearly, they're just seeing certain elements going, "yes sir." I had a guy, and I won't say the company's name, but it never fails, they are so used

to saying, "yes sir" that every time I talk to them it's like, "yes si—, I mean..." It's just ingrained, they just deal with men all the time out there, and they don't deal with a woman, a young woman which I was years ago when I started; I started when I was like twenty-eight. In some ways I've had issues with food critics and all sort of people that just — we have to be twice as good as men.

MC: Do you think it's the same in the farmers market, or are there more women involved there versus being a restaurant owner?

MP: I mean we were just talking about that. You know, I don't know, we're trying to make City Hall in particular more diverse, you know they really want to see people of color, they want to see women. I think typically you're dealing, typically your dealing with a family so there is usually a husband and a wife. I was just reading Blue Heron's card, I hadn't seen it before and he's — I have it actually [reaching into her wallet] it was so cute, it was like why are they —. Oh did I give that away? It was like she was boss lady at Blue Heron and whatever, and he was like CEO, and whatever it was just sort of like, it was cute, but it was also like, "oh, he gets to be the CEO, but you get to be the boss lady." It's like, "wait!" I think it was cute, cause it was like, "really, we're playing these roles out there in the country with our little goats and stuff." No matter how you cut it, it's harder being a woman, it's harder being a different color, it's just harder you know. This world is run by white men, in suits in particular [laughing], and they don't ever really connect with who we are and what we're about. They don't get it, they're in it — I just had a full panel discussion with somebody, I just got so livid, I thought I'm never doing this again, I've been on two panels with them, and never doing it again. Because everybody wants to ask this person who runs the HISD school food system, they want to ask him you know the question and address the problem and have him solve it, but he's never going to solve it. He is the problem! You know, he and the big business that its children's food, you know, they are the problem. They don't want to work in a different system, they want to work in the system that they've created and it doesn't work. It's big, big, big, you can't be flexible, you can't be swift and you can't be healthy, you're just stuck, you're stuck in the big dysfunctional food system, which is where you are comfortable. You don't know about food, you don't care about food — the kids, well the kids like them. Well of course they like the brand, that's what they know, they watch TV all the time. Do they know a farmers market? I mean my daughter will walk by and, "well that's not a real carrot," cause it's purple. Well sweetie it is. What do you think is a carrot, the one in the cellophane bag the little nubs, I mean no, that's a marketing thing, you know. It's not real, there is no nutritional value, so long story short, that is the problem. No matter where you go it's white men in suits, in this country, big business, big money, big ad and yeah, it doesn't matter if you are small farmer whose male, it doesn't matter. It's just never going to work.

MC: Do you have anyone, of the women that are involved in farmers markets and local food and things, do you have any that you particularly look up to or have been an inspiration to you?

MP: Uh, women?

MC: Women. Yes.

MP: Um yeah, I mean absolutely. I think it would be fascinating to talk to Gita Von Woerden, I mean she's from a different country she's been here for a long time but she's from a different country; she may have a whole different perspective. You know Lola Daniel is a black woman who had been in urban gardens for years and you know none of these people are ever going to get rich, but on some level I think they're happy doing what they do. You know Lisa from Blue Heron — it's interesting when you get past everybody trying to set their tents up and sell their stuff what you hear from people. Everybody has a story, and everybody has a struggle, just to keep the family farm going or the family, you know that kind of thing. It's not — none of these people are [phone rings] big, big, big you know. But yeah there is a tone of people. Jackie Berdista who does really beautiful artisan work, she does a kind of French focus table of French macaroons, and more French things like _____. I mean she just gets up every week and does it, two or three markets a week, nobody trying to do thirty, making it into big business.

That's what upsets me when you have these people that — I mean I have two restaurants essentially so you know you can criticize me but, and I have a kitchen full of people who produce what I need them to produce, but I could have decided that there were twenty markets all over the state and made a ton of money. But I don't do it, because it doesn't make sense, sustainable — like it's supposed to be small scale, like why is Monica Pope going to be at the Dallas Farmers Markets with her green plum kitchen like oh we can justify. That the big question when you ask these guys like Garry Hersberger or Rick Bayless, it's like what are you doing at Burger King or what are you doing in Wal-mart. It's like well this is where I can make an impact, it's like, okay. You know everybody makes their decisions, but what makes sense? You know the guy from Polyface Farms on Food Inc., he's sitting there saying, "I have no interest in being in Wal-Mart." There is a local guy that would love to be in Wal-Mart, but there is a local guy who says "no!" People travel four hundred, five hundred miles to come and get Polyface Farms stuff, and he's out of Virginia. You know a similar situation here, where is the local person who wants to be local and wants to be and wants to serve his local community, to the best of his ability. Not be rich, like Jolie Vue farms is a perfect example, they spent years on the farm, fifteen, sixteen plus years, he's a lawyer by trade [the owner], but they've spent the last eight years at the farmers markets basically building their home delivery service for Berkshire Duroc pigs and red heritage veal and they have a local couple that does chickens and stuff. They basically present two hundred and fifty to three hundred families with their monthly mix. They're the only profitable farm in Washington County, two, only two years ago, of working towards just some level of sustainability. Like we're not going to get rich but can we just pay for the farm, could I retire from law, could I just give people some good food, that kind of thing. And I know that they were up at Polyface and kind of got inspired by that whole thing and they've done a great job to get there, but every single person out there has to make that decision though, like what is sustainable and what works.

MC: Do you think that the farmers market here in the city versus ones that are out into the more rural area or even in other states. I mean how do you compare those, do you think it is easier for them because there are more in a country area, I guess if you would call it that?

MP: I guess, I mean yeah, well, I don't know. We do have quite a few farms around, I mean not further than a hundred and fifty miles. I went out to Tomball, recently to get my own stuff and it was a thirty-six mile one way thing, so within thirty-six miles, forty, fifty miles, you know you can get some stuff, but what happens is a lot of those rural farmers decide not to come in, and stay on their farm and do a CSA, and have you know their people and that's what we should be doing, we should be having little communities of great food systems that were all — nobody's like let me go to ten different farmers markets in my area and make a ton of money. It's just hard sometimes to coax that guy or that woman in to the town to do — you know your, "well okay wait, you're seventy-eight miles, well Monica I can't come in, not on a Saturday, I've gotta stay —." Or not on a Tuesday, so we've had to build, you know sort of local urban growers. That's the whole thing we were talking about yesterday down at City Hall saying, you know we have this sort of garden, you know backyard garden community table, we have co-ops, we have different people, makes it easier to get the good stuff we need, and keep it diversified and then one person doesn't have to come in with the one thing that they have to try to sell it. That was a big question with Wednesday, it's a tough day, it's the middle of the work week, ten to two it's going to take from eight until three or four, it's like there's the whole work day gone for a farmer. Is it going to be worth it? We have about ten produce people that are out there it's a big question mark for those guys. It's not easy anywhere, but you do see where there's a lot more stuff happening everywhere, but even out in the country where there's you pick'um and stop by the little store.

MC: I guess this is one of my last questions, I guess. You personally are an advocate of community and local food, do you have any future plans? What are your future plans, I guess for the farmers market and for the, this _____ [*t'afia*?]

MP: My only future plan is to keep *t'afia* going. Beavers is doing well, we're trying to pay off all that, well we basically paid off all the debt, if you will, it's been three years. It takes about three to five years to get that taken care of. I want to keep making sure that does well. On site as I've said I have an upstairs that we've been using for the last couple years as a, this cooking class, called Cooking Therapy, and you know interactive stuff and parties. I'm trying to push that to this different level you know it's like, I guess a couple of years ago I decided to offer something different at the farmers market. There's a lot of people out there doing little chef demos and stuff and that's all fine and well.

I actually want to do more of that and really get back to the old, old ways of doing stuff where you know if you were to think of us being in a small village, everybody would end up kind of at the baker's every morning getting some fresh bread, its that kind of thing. Going back to that kind of thing, of like I'm going to go get the three or four staples that I

need to today, I'm trying to create that here instead of just that Saturday morning Midtown Farmers Market thing, which is great. We'll still do something like that, but I want to have this kitchen that people will come to, because they think it's a kitchen. It's funny I was trying to explain it to somebody and I didn't say the word kitchen but I was saying all these other things and I was like — it's a kitchen, — right. But ten years from now we not even realize what a kitchen is, cause we may not be even [she stops to talk to a employee again], you know it's just funny, I had to laugh cause it's like, "Monica this is not that complicated", but in some ways we're losing all this stuff [talking to employee again]. We're losing all this stuff, so my daughter will know what a kitchen is obviously, but twenty years from now, what the generation —, will they know what a kitchen is, will they know what happens there? Will they be sitting down to the table, no. So here you are desperately trying to explain what you're trying to do in the kitchen. [sarcastically, in a higher voice] "Oh my God, they don't exist anymore." You know. Keep the fire, you know and I have a wood burning brick oven up there — and you know it's just — I think…

I mean just to give you an idea, my daughter was doing an assignment last year for first grade, she had to interview one of her parents, and the assignment was in the last twenty years, which I thought was interesting because I've been doing this for twenty years, how has your job changed because of technology. And I though wow that is great, sweetie look, mommy does blogs now, mommy tweets now, mommy does the computer now, everything and all this stuff, but she literally is just like, no! No! No! And I'm not like baby this is the assignment like I'm telling you how it's changed, you know twenty years ago we didn't have cell phones and online while we were cooking, and all this stuff. And she is like, I'm like what, and she is like, "well what about the stove?" I'm like "well it's the exact same, [laughing] it's the stove from twenty years ago." In her mind she was thinking what has obviously, kitchens have become kind of high tech and all this stuff, but in my world, no. Technologically speaking there's a lot of wonderful things that have happened that in some ways make a lot of what I do easier, but cooking, light a fire, put a pan on it, and see what you got. That's it. Apart from all this gastro cooking stuff that has been done, that I'll never get into because at every juncture I'm going backwards to the way it used to be, and say let's just do really simple, good, local food. They asked me on the panel, they were like, "well you're the celebrity chef and why do you think you're here, basically?" And I don't — I forget how I answered but afterward I was like, you know I'm like chicken little you know running around saying the sky is falling, and everybody is like no it's not falling. But no it really is falling, I'm here, I think with my business and what I care about to remind people, that food should taste really good, it should be really good for us, and it shouldn't be devastating on our environment, it shouldn't be. And that we should have all this beautiful relationship in it whether it's just an appreciation for what we were able to grow, or what somebody else was able to grow or the people in our community that give us these things, that offer us these things. It's not the big, go to Costco and look up to the ceiling and go "we'll take two big cases of that, and get two carts and let's load up." It's the opposite of that, come and just get something, that is really beautiful and nourishing, right now, you know and go back. It's an effort for people, their lives are changing so much, technologically, and you know we

spend how much less time cooking and more time on Facebook. You know what I mean? And what, so we can catch up with people we knew twenty years ago. But we spend as little time as we can cooking and being with our families. I did this last night with my daughter and it was just fascinating, you know, I mean I am y'all. I'm in the same boat, and I have been extremely busy of late and yesterday I just said, I'm going to do — I'm going to braise the chicken now, you know and we're going to set the table, all this stuff. It was a lesson, of is it possible and will she sit down, will we sit there and eat, you know, it's a lot, a lot of stuff, and I think it makes good to them.

MC: I mean I think summed it up unless you have something that you have anything you want to add personally.

MP: I don't think so. I think we've hit on quite a bit.

MC: Ok great. Well that is the end of the interview.

MP: Thank you.