Deanne Bryce: Well, we, Steve and I, both are working together at a business that we call Solar’s Real Foods, and when we think about how we got here, I think about our story as individuals and it involves food, and our story in terms of a career involves food. For me there was an intersection between what I was doing as a career and what I was doing in regard to the way that I approached food. Even in education, you wouldn't think that those two intersect but even in education it did because I taught first graders. And when I taught first graders, we talked to them about food. We talked to them about how food was made, and we would go on farm tours and so forth. And when I really think about it, I think, “Wow, we rewarded little first graders with food, with sugar!” It’s something that we ended up rewarding them, “Aw, if you do this, we’ll have this party and we’ll do this with food.” So it’s just something that is really part of our life and I think everybody’s life.

But I never really thought about how, I guess, the impact of food, until we started having customers at our restaurant and seeing them over time and seeing their relationship to food and seeing what choices they were making around food. And two big changes happened. One, was we would see people choose different food based on their health because maybe they were feeling they needed to lose weight. But then people also started to make change on what they ordered based on food intolerances, which is their health, too, but it’s not something you directly think of; it’s more of a chronic condition that they were having, and their doctors, or somehow they discovered they might have an intolerance to, say, wheat or dairy or something like that, and that was not something I had ever experienced until we met them face-to-face, taking their order, really—at the restaurant.

And for Steve, his career and food, has always involved food.

Steve Bryce: Yeah, I grew up in agriculture on a farm and went to college, majored in animal science. Worked in the food business for many, many years, mainly the meat business. And I always liked food. The thing that I missed with being in a food company, or the food business, is you never know what the customer really thinks, the consumer really thinks. You know, there are so many brokers, intermediaries, and middle men, that you don’t get that feedback and I always wanted a food business, and that’s what a restaurant is, a food business, where the customer is the consumer. And after about 25 years of working in the food industry, corporate, I grew tired of it. I always toyed with the idea of having a restaurant. We’ve lived all over the country with moving around for companies, and we ended up in Marshall, Minnesota, and saw this drive-in for sale. It was built at least 50 years ago as an A&W drive-in and changed hands through the years and gradually ran down and we saw it, and I don’t know what I saw in it other than the fact that you could share part of the historical icon, if you will. So, we bought it, and fixed it up a little bit that first summer, and ran it with pretty much traditional drive-in fare. But then based on the community’s response, which was good, and the facility really needed some help, we decided to invest and remodel it. So we did, and remodeled the whole structure, added an indoor dining room and a nice patio outside, and then started operation. Changed the menu slightly; we added things over the year so the menu
became more diner-like rather than a drive-in, but we still retained the name because everybody called it the drive-in anyway, no matter what it looked like; it was still the drive-in.

But, over the years we found ourselves not really eating what the customers were enjoying. Our diet, our habits, our taste changed, and also we didn’t really like participating in the standard American diet. So we decided last fall to stop. We closed, and we decided to rebrand, and we are opening again in the spring. Used to be the Solar Drive-in; the tag line was, “It’s more than a drive-in,” which covered some of the menu items that we changed over the years, but we decided to really take a leap this time and rebrand it, call it Solar’s Real Food Kitchen and Cafe. The cafe part is pretty obvious; we will be a restaurant. The kitchen part, though, in the off season when we are not open as a restaurant we still want to do the education piece, we want to open up our kitchen for cooking classes, and we did that for two years now, in the fall, winter, and spring. To us, educating and teaching about food, teaching people how to cook, exposing them to different taste, different styles, new cuisines, is really, really exciting, very, very rewarding. So, that part of it is fun.

Some of those things we incorporated into our menu as a cafe now. But, certainly not the more exotic things, but some things. And we’re hoping that by changing the name to Real Food, our definition of that is prepared with culinary skills, simple food. You don’t simply dump it out of the bag like many, many, many, restaurants do. Nowadays, this scratch cooking is hard to find unless you go to a fine dining restaurant—it appears lately, sadly. But we want to have a menu comprised of what we’re calling “old favorites,” which is some of the drive-in foods such as burgers that are still a carry over, and we’re not really calling them real food. But we do have these sandwiches, we call them baked hot wraps, and they are real food. I make the dough here; we bake those wraps here. We buy really good cheese from Wisconsin. The toppings, you know: I grill the chicken here. It’s not that marinated plump chicken; it’s chicken. It’s our own seasoning, our own blends; it’s done here, and it’s diced here. We feel that constitutes real food.

So in our menu, there is a designation for real food or not real food. People can choose. It all tastes pretty good, but it’s based on what went into it as far as culinary technique is concerned, as well as the ingredients. The other distinction that we are doing now is: certain items we’re calling wheat-free; we can’t really call them gluten-free because we’ve got flour in the restaurant, and for those that are super sensitive to wheat and gluten products—celiacs—it’s hard to eliminate cross-contamination when you’ve got flour in the facility at all, but we are saying they are wheat-free on certain menu items. So certain items we are designating as wheat-free, other items that we’ve got we’re making a distinction that they are dairy-free. Some people are intolerant or don’t do very well to lactose, so for those menu items, they’re still full of flavor and made with care and culinary skill, but we’re saying that they’re dairy-free, and the approach that we’re taking to get there is a lot of cuisines around the world don’t utilize dairy, or don’t have to utilize dairy, or wheat or many of the other top eight allergens. Top eight allergens are wheat, dairy, soy, egg, fish, shellfish, nuts, and tree nuts, so we are trying to do cuisines, for example our rice plates: long-grain brown rice, various toppings and seasonings that go into the sauce on top of the rice, a slaw on the side and each slaw will have a dressing that is created for the specific rice plate dish. So most of those items are dairy-free or certainly can be dairy-free and they’re all wheat-free. So a
customer can come in that’s intolerant or maybe just doesn't want to consume those items—
can feel great about having a menu choice that is full of flavor and doesn’t have the top eight
allergens in it.

So we’re kinda happy to be forging ground in that area, that’s kinda what we spend our down
time doing is a lot of cooking, a lot of experimenting in not using any of the food from the top
eight allergens, and it’s possible. It’s very doable. We’re going to create more and more of
those. And as we create over time, we’ll certainly have many new menu items. Our hope is
that people will still enjoy the old favorite; that is why we still have them on the menu—but at
the same time, that they’ll trust us enough, and many do, if not most do, to try the new items,
so that you know we can expand and continue to expand our menu out.

**Peter Shea:** So what was your experience kinda growing up with food? I mean, how new are
all of these ideas that you’ve come to?

**Steve:** Pretty new.

**Peter:** So how did they get into your head? I mean I grew up on a little farm and I just think
of what I ate growing up. They weren’t very daring, so you’ve stretched a lot farther than
people in my community. How did that all happen?

**Steve:** I guess living around the country. One of the menu items we’re not going to have
anymore but we did for years, we lived about 12 years around Philadelphia, and obviously
there’s a lot of Philly cheese steak back there.

**Peter:** My son makes those. [laughs]

**Steve:** So we did a Philly cheese steak here and we did it fairly authentic. Most of the cheese
steaks you have in Minnesota are, let’s just say, an interpretation of the Philly cheese steak.
One of the key components is the bread itself. It has to be on a good roll and the right roll. It
can’t just be on a big hot dog bun, which is a lot times just how it’s served. So, because I
couldn’t find the good roll here, we baked them. So I baked Italian rolls that we used on the
Philly steak sandwiches for those years. Our daughter has lived in China; right now she’s
living in England. She certainly brought home new food ideas from around the world. I guess
it’s just living around the United States, being willing to try new restaurants and new food that
you come home and you say, “Boy, I wish I could experience that great taste again.”

**Deanne:** The biggest change, though, I think came about when we decided to try to cook.
Steve likes to cook, so for him just making the same thing over and over was hard. And so
when we decided: “Let’s see what you can make without the top eight allergens,” and then
when we started, the reason why we even thought of that idea is because our son, who was in
his twenties, he was working with us at the restaurant but was also going to school, and he
was having troubles with acne, and he had tried many things...
Steve: ...for many years...

Deanne: For many years, to clear up his face. And we kept saying, “It’s got be about something you’re eating,” or you know, just that sense that somebody, just that health comes from something bigger than just, I don’t know, it’s like he’s a whole system, you know, so it’s like something he was doing was creating a problem or creating a trigger of problems. So he started doing research on the Internet and he discovered that there were a lot of people out there that felt that the way that you ate impacted your face and he cut out wheat and dairy and that was mostly it, right?

Steve: Mostly it.

Deanne: And within a month, his face cleared up. And then he was able to reintroduce those foods in small amounts, you know, it wasn’t like he could never eat those foods, but he just, he broke away from that standard American diet that had that stuff in it. And he started eating a lot of things from other cultures and he went to visit his sister who was in China, and they ate a lot of different places. And then he likes to cook, so he would come back and he would cook. He actually had a… At that time he was doing an online cooking show, so he was actually creating recipes and preparing them, and most of them came from different cultures—not all of them, but a lot of them did.

Steve: A lot of them did.

Deanne: Just so he could get away from those ingredients. So then that was how we got the idea to go with that. And also Steve’s mom is intolerant to wheat. We never even considered her needs; we would just cook whatever we wanted to cook and it was kinda too bad, but then we started to think, “You know, that’s really insensitive.” Because when people do have those needs, you need to address them.

Steve: They’re real.

Deanne: Yeah, you need to address them. So, and then we also went to a class because we were interested in it; it’s not like we just happened to go to this class. And so we drove to the cities and went to this class at the National Restaurant Association, or the Minnesota Restaurant Association, I should say, and it was on how restaurants can respond to food intolerances. And we saw that other restaurants were struggling in the ways we were, you know, how can you meet these customers’ needs? And so the biggest change we made to our own diet is when we decided, “Okay, we’re gonna clean out all the top eight allergens.” We closed the restaurant. We could clean it out, and then we started eating differently, and then when we started eating different, it was so hard to eat a standard American diet again.

Steve: Real hard.
Deanne: We noticed from time to time when we’d be traveling, we’d say, “Ah you know, we’ll just eat that; we used to eat that, would be fine,” and then we wouldn’t feel right. So then over time, during this time that we were off, we’d be more careful about, you know. If were traveling somewhere, you know, where we weren’t gonna be able to control what we ate, we might take something with us: a salad Steve had prepared here, or if we were traveling, somewhere else in a place where we were staying. So that was where we made the biggest change. And so it’s been very recent, and I guess it just came about from listening to those customers that had needs, and starting to recognize that our family had needs that we had been ignoring. You know Steve’s mom, who works with us in the restaurant, and then our son, we’re like, wait a minute. And then personally for me I decided maybe I should go without dairy because I had been a lot of congestion in my nose and stuff and from what I had read, and so I did, and I felt a lot better without.

Steve: I think a lot of time people think that not feeling good is normal. That you eat and you don’t feel good afterwards and that’s just what you’re supposed to feel, and that’s not true. It doesn’t have to be that way. And that’s what we noticed when we ate better and then went back and ate from the standard American diet. You just don’t feel good; you just notice that something’s amiss.

Deanne: But we know that everybody has a different place in their own choices and what everybody eats...

Steve: ...Well and that’s why we want to offer...

Deanne: ...yeah that’s why we offer things...

Steve: ...multiple things...

Deanne: ...because there might be one person in the family that is choosing to eat very carefully because of a food intolerance and the rest of the family isn’t there yet, and we want them to be able to enjoy a meal together at a restaurant.

Steve: It’s funny because, you know, as I said, my college degree is in animal science, and I worked a lot of years in production agriculture, and, you know, with animals. You know, for anybody that grows livestock, nutrition is preeminent. That’s all they worry about, you know, a very balanced diet, you know. Nutrition is everything. It’s so important, and yet you talk to people. Us humans, we don’t really give a second thought. We don’t really know or care what we put in our bodies. Well if you’re raising livestock to be efficient, healthy, productive, don’t you want yourself to be efficient, productive, healthy too? So not that we’re animals but we’re mammals and we function similar biochemically. It should matter what you put in. Our nutrition, if you will, should be very, very important, and sadly, over the years, we’ve let ourselves be—we’ve been lax in paying attention to what we consume, what we eat.
And, you know, food companies—it’s not their fault. They’re doing their job. They’re selling food; that’s what they’re supposed to do. That’s what their shareholders demand, and they become really good at it. They advertise it, they market it, and formulate it, and create a product that’s very, very, very tasty, but I don’t know if they’re the best for us. I do remember. As I said, I was in the beef industry, and you know cattle feed lots and stuff—and some of the locations they would take food waste from food manufacturing plants and feed it to the cattle, which is a good way to use that resource. It’s, you know, not landfilled. The cattle can gain energy and do ok. However, they have to be super proficient in analyzing the feed and formulating the feed, because a lot of the food waste, human waste from food plants, destined for human consumption except you know that it is packaged wrong or was slightly more toasty than it should be but salt and fat are really high and are very limiting in the cattle’s diet. So they would have to really be careful that only a certain amount of crackers could go in, only a certain amount of cookies, only a certain amount of burrito dough wrapping, because of salt and fat. Well, if cattle can only get 5 to 10 percent of that, and yet we’re eating 100 percent of that, it just doesn’t, if you stand back, it just doesn’t make sense.

Peter: So, were you both pretty much in the grip of the standard American diet until fairly recently

Steve: Yeah, it tastes good. It tastes really good.

Deanne: Yeah, we laugh about our kids are definitely ahead of us and so our daughter would try to do certain things to try and get like she would buy some kale and say you should do something with kale, and Steve wouldn't do anything with it, and now he’s like pretty into one of the soups we’re gonna offer. And we actually planted a garden and we had it last summer, the garden, and he didn’t even plant kale in the garden. Now, you, this year...

Steve: ...but the garden is right out the side of our restaurant, and we do use the garden during the summer, obviously, when it’s producing. We create a dish every week. We call it the farmer-chef special and incorporate either something from our garden or every Saturday morning we have a farmer’s market in the parking lot—something from the farmer’s market that week—in other words, seasonal produce. We try to incorporate that into dishes.

Deanne: Our thinking with that is to make it accessible, and we share the recipes with people. We have a website, and we add those recipes on our website.

Steve: The garden itself is, you know, out here in the rural area, a lot of people have gardens in the backyards or on the farm, and it’s not that novel, but in a very confined space, which you know we didn’t have a lot of space because you know we still need to leave room for parking, but we created a very, let’s say, condensed (garden), I guess.

Deanne: Yeah, condensed.

Steve: ...Concise! Garden, yeah—it’s raised beds. I wanted to model something that even if you didn’t have a lot of space: here’s a way that you could grow some food in a fairly
attractive way, because raised beds are contained and they’re raised...

**Deanne:** ...they’re not as messy...

**Steve:** ...not as messy...

**Deanne:** ...or they don’t look as messy. [laughs]

**Steve:** ...still get weeds. But it’s very pleasant to look at. It’s very easy to maintain. We wanted a model the people, whether its urban, suburban, rural could say, “You know, I could do that, I could do that.” And we’re also growing some vegetables in pots and then training the vines up on the fence and, you know, just trying to model.

**Deanne:** ...sometimes they don’t turn out so well.

**Steve:** ...That’s just...farming is farming, and when you farm stuff, you know you’re—the weather, the insects, and disease, and you know food is a messy business. We’ve all been led to believe that it’s a perfectly planned, sterile business, and all the vegetables always look the same, and every week in the store, and you know what that isn’t how it is. And if that’s how it is, then it’s had a lot of things done, a lot of things have been manipulated to make it appear that it’s uniform beautiful and standard.

**Deanne:** So the way that we eat has changed dramatically, but Steve’s thinking about agriculture and the sustainability of it has been a long term. That’s probably why we started the garden, because he’s had a passion for, you know like it’s gotta be different, it’s not sustainable the way that we’re doing agriculture nowadays, even though it’s part of your business, part of your upbringing [directed towards Steve].

**Steve:** Yeah I mean, yeah. I’m a trained agriculturalist. You know, but all those years, it just, over time it just didn’t sit right. I mean, I was trained to grow the maximum amount of food possible, most efficient manner possible, and by gosh we can do it, but at what cost? Whether it’s economic, or environment or etc. I just, it just didn’t sit right as time passed over the years; there had to be a better way of growing food, whether it’s the animal proteins or the grains or even vegetables and fruit—we actually have a orchard here at the restaurant, too, along the edge of the property. I planted some apple trees, a couple of pear trees, and I’m trying peaches. That’s gonna be a disaster, but you gotta try. Everybody says you’re crazy for planting peaches, but you gotta try.

**Deanne:** ...you mean peaches in Minnesota...

**Steve:** ...Peaches in Minnesota! Yeah. It’s too cold here, which it is, but we’ll try.

**Steve:** Food is just messy and I think the more that people could get involved—grow some of the their food, any, just a little but that even if it fails, that’s good, because it will help you appreciate work and planning and effort involved in growing food. And I think, the more people can be appreciative of the food, I think it’s better. I can’t see a downside to
appreciating food.

**Deanne:** No.

**Steve:** Food, there’s just not a downside, and I guess our tiny little garden here, and our tiny little effort to actually teach people how to cook, and our little effort to use different menu items actually uses culinary skills rather than just dumping it out of a food service patty…

**Deanne:** But simple culinary skills.

**Steve:** Yes, simple. You know I’m not a trained chef. I’m just a guy who likes food, who is willing to experiment and fail therefore. You know but most of the time, unless it’s really bad, you can usually eat your failures. They’re okay. That’s good. I also do a lot of reading. There’s just, well, not just cookbooks, but books on the science of cooking out there and that’s what I really enjoy, is what’s going on with the science of cooking. And also the science of growing food. There’s plenty of science books; the Internet's full of health advice so. A little self-time. And also we have a lot of customers who do garden, and they're willing to offer a lot of input and advice about our garden. It’s all good. It’s all good.

**Peter:** Well I guess, I guess I wonder about your home life. I mean this process going from the American standard diet, and a bunch of the standard American attitudes to so many different notions about diet and attitudes, and I mean, was it very gradual? Did you have one of those light beams come on, like in ET? How did it happen?

**Steve:** There was no, yeah, there was no instant lightning. There was just lots and lots of—over the years just knowing—when I did work at traditional agriculture—that it just wasn’t right.

**Deanne:** I think where we are now with food, we’ve kind of always been there deep inside. We just used to always justify the way we were with food. You know, but the rest of it you know, like the health, and the whole systems. Where when one part of our body will impact the other part of our body. But with food, we just, it was like a blinder was in front of our eyes. But when that blinder, or whatever blinder came off. But the whole rest of it made perfect sense, because you always were looking for better ways—to you know like we’ve chosen to live in a small footprint. We just...

**Steve:** Yeah, we literally live behind the restaurant across the alley in the house. We have no commute. It’s a very small house, and we joke that it’s two to three times as big as what we need. So we drive a little car because we’ve had big cars, we’ve had fancy cars over the years, and they all get dirty, they all need to be washed over the years, so just, does it matter?

**Deanne:** And the same things with our careers, I mean you can definitely have more take-home pay if you work in corporate America. And both of us, we don’t like that, because we weren’t together and you know you don’t have time to think for yourself. You’re always thinking about the next problem for the next day at the meeting that you have to present on and things like that. So...
Steve: And our food culture’s good. They’re provided solutions where you don’t have to think: a frozen entree you can pop in the oven. Or a multitude of areas you can get take out or dine out. Unfortunately that’s become too prevalent.

Peter: Okay, so you’d had a lot of kind of non-standard ideas in other areas of your life but you were still...food was kind of the last holdout of conventional wisdom...

Deanne: ...Yes, it was.

Peter: ...so to speak. Any idea why food...why it took longer to think in unusual ways with regard to food?

Steve: ’Cause it’s easy not to think in unconventional ways.

Deanne: Well, in some ways because it was what we did. You don’t want to analyze what you do too much, because it makes you feel uncomfortable. We worked for food companies. Both of us worked for a food company, and, you know, you don’t really want to admit that that’s your livelihood and so you just, you know, like go along with the flow. And even us owning the restaurant, you know, we’re thinking about what we’re fixing, and we just reached a point where we’re like, “Wait, we’re thinking about this now. We can’t keep fixing it; we have to somehow organize it.” And so we needed this time off to kind of organize and okay, we can serve this kind of food but we’re also going to serve a different kind of food. We’re going to introduce something different, and if people choose to, they can come because it’s a very personal choice, and we don’t want to be accused of...

Steve: ...judging people...

Deanne: ...yeah...

Steve: ...we’re not here to judge.

Deanne: ...cause we just don’t think that’s...there’s a lot of food advocates out there that are like very angry and I guess we’re the type of food advocate that’s just like, “We’ve been there. We’ve done all the things that everybody has probably done.”

Steve: You know, it’s only been like a six to eight months since I actually, finally gave up...

Deanne: ...drinking pop...

Steve: ...drinking pop, which I drank pop from the time I was, it was probably my sippy...

Deanne: ...sippy cup.

Steve: ... yeah, sippy cup, or whatever they’re called...
Deanne: ...It was definitely in our kids’ sippy cups.

Steve: Unfortunately, but you know it was the switch to diet pop, 20 years ago, right?

Deanne: Yeah.

Steve: But then I finally just quit drinking pop 16 months ago, so that’s a long journey.

Deanne: Yeah.

Steve: And now when I go back and I’ve tried it two or three times since then, and it doesn’t taste good; it really doesn’t. Especially diet pop. You say, “Why did I drink that stuff? You did.” It tasted good then! Not as good now. So I think from that we can be sympathetic with people with wherever they are on their journey. And not that we’re going to cook the most local, organic food out there. There are many other restaurants that are...

Deanne: ...way ahead of us...

Steve: ...way ahead of us on that. But also we are in an area where people can’t afford extremely expensive meals. There’s a, you know, it’s a rural area. They’re just, you know, working people. So what they need is wholesome food that at least has options to be less undesirable. Would that be an accurate way?

Deanne: Well, it’s just helping them see that they can cook with fruits and vegetables, because I mean the more you read, we all need more fruits and vegetables, but that’s not something you get from a processed food company.

Steve: No, no. There’s not much mark-up or ability to change those simple fruit and vegetables, so they don’t push those.

Peter: Well when you talk about the eight most common allergens and an attempt to provide options that don’t involve those, you are talking a language that I don’t hear very much in Minneapolis/St. Paul. There are usually gluten-free options in decently sized menu, but I don’t think people would be real happy to have that list of the eight most common allergen spread around. Pretty soon people would begin asking about the other ones, and that’s just to say—I mean with a very large metropolitan area to draw on, I can see okay there are going to people with all these allergies. They’ll make you restaurant your home. But the American drive-in is like the emblem of the American standard food....

Deanne: It is!

Steve: Which is why we changed the name; it wasn't a drive-in anymore.

Peter: I mean, it was. That was why it always felt like a guilty pleasure because of the Solar Drive-in when I, you know, came through here, you know. And in fact, I’ll tell you a secret. I was running a class where we were eating as healthy as people eat. We worked really hard on
it. I would occasionally take the kids for a vacation to the Solar Drive-in to have something familiar. And they were real happy to order and they feel real kind of you know, what—daring—eating French fries and things. So I guess I’m curious: this seems to be an urban idea in a certain way; it’s the sort of thing that makes a lot of sense when you have a big population to draw on. What’s involved in doing it here?

Deanne: You mean, why are we doing it here?

Peter: Yeah, and what are you thinking in doing it here?

Steve: Well, we’re doing it here because we are here, and we’re doing it because it’s the right thing to do.

Deanne: Yeah, and we used to say that, oh, we can’t do that until this. You know, we can’t grow garden until we’re in an urban area. We can’t do that, and all of a sudden, we’re like, “Well, we’re here, let’s just do it!” And, you know, it’s like somehow when you want to do something that you think is the right thing to do, and you make up excuses? That’s what we were doing, and we just quit making excuses.

Steve: Now as far as if we were in a metropolitan area, of course, we’d blast that marketing-wise: “We’re this and this and this.” Here, I guess what we’ll do: we will say it’s wheat-free or dairy-free. We are saying it’s real food. Beyond that we’re not. However: when a mom comes in and her child has an egg allergy and a soy allergy and we not only are aware of it. We honor it, and we respect it...

Deanne: ...because we do have those customers. We do. And that’s what created the awareness....

Steve: ...98 or 80 or whatever percent—they apparently don’t have any intolerance. It doesn’t matter. They could care less, and that’s fine; we’re not going to emphasize it. But that small, small percentage, and I don’t know what the percentage is, depending on who or what, it’s pretty darn important. The health of your child is extraordinarily important, and we want to honor that. It isn’t just children. A lot of people in their fifties, sixties, even seventies are finally being diagnosed, if you will, or at least become aware that they have food intolerances, and for all these years they’ve spent in less than optimal health...

Deanne: Yeah, not feeling the best.

Steve: Not feeling the best that they could. Yeah, so it isn’t just the kids.

Deanne: So the people that are starting to have those inklings, then we can have conversations with those people, and the people that don’t care—its okay we’re not gonna...

Steve: ...we’re still gonna offer somethings...

Deanne: ...we’re not gonna be snooty and say you can’t be here.
Steve: No, no, no we’re not involved in an urban, high-brow process. We do get a lot of traffic though from urban areas, from, you know, the Twin Cities and stuff, so they think this is a really, really cool place, and in fact they can’t understand why we’re not in the Twin Cities, but right here, right now, we’re here, and we want to continue to experiment, explore, and then, you know, if we can provide less bad options, healthier, use whatever terminology you want, for people, that still tastes good, why not have our local customer base be better? Why not? It seems like a win-win to us.

Deanne: There are some things happening in our community, though, around food and the obesity crisis. I am on the child wellness committee through the Mayo Clinic in Springfield, and, being on that also helped me to say, “Uh, I don’t know that I’m proud that I own Solar Drive-in.” And I can say now that I’m proud that I own Solar’s Real Food, because we’ve thought about it. We’re not just mindlessly selling ice cream and we have options, and so it’s a personal choice—and the same way with pop. So, anyway, with the child wellness committee, we decided to show the movie, The Weight of the Nation, and it’s an HBO series, and it started last May. They showed it on TV. It’s designed to show to a community so a community can come together and think about the obesity crisis and how it impacts a community. And so our community went through that in February, and we have, oh help me out with how many people live in our community cause I always get mixed up...

Steve: oh 21, 2,200.

Deanne: So we had no idea how many people would come. We thought, well maybe people on the committee will come and their spouses, so at least 20 people. And it ended up, and you had to go to four sessions. There were 97 people that came to one, at least one of the four sessions. And a majority of those people went to at least three of those sessions, like I think 70 went to that. And then people asked if we could show it again, so it’s being aired again in April. And that is going to be at the hospital, and I don’t know how many people will come to that. We won’t be involved in that, because we will be running the restaurant at that point. We won’t get to go to the movie showing, but there’s a definite awareness that the obesity crisis has hit our area. And one of the things that we learned in that The Weight of the Nation series is that an important part of a community is to have access to streets that are accessible, that you can walk, and walking trails and you know. Our community has that, we have a swimming pool, we have a skating rink. Our community is really...

Steve: ...lots of parks.

Deanne: ...lots of parks. And, in fact, we’re just getting one of our parks revamped. The city has put money into it in the school. So there’s a lot of people in the community saying, “Wait–this obesity crisis.” So it kinda feels like we’re at a right time and the right place in terms of our business, because we repositioned ourself to at least support that aspect of it. In a way, we’ll have to see what it’s like, but you know in a way, it’s all an experiment...

Steve: ...right.
Deanne: ...You know, we open in two weeks. Who knows what it will be like, but so far we’ve had a lot of good feedback, because we have a lot of people on Facebook that kinda follow what we’re doing, and people have been excited that we’re reopening. And we’ve even heard comments, people telling us that, “It doesn’t matter what you serve; just open up!”

Steve: It’ll be good.

Deanne: It’ll be good. And that’s kinda cool, because then people will trust you to try something new.

Steve: Well, and in watching that series its...

Deanne: ...in The Weight of the Nation...

Steve: In The Weight of the Nation, you know as a restauranteur that’s served a lot of the food that has come under fire—you know, the fast food standard American food diet...

Deanne: ...doesn’t make you feel good...

Steve: ...No! It makes you feel bad! That wait a minute, you’re, yeah...

Deanne: ...you’re contributing to that...

Steve: ...yeah I mean it’s their choice, but on the other hand, you’ve offered it, therefore I don’t know who’s responsible or if it’s shared responsibility, but having different alternatives on our menus now, I can feel better that, “Yes, we’ll still offer some of those things that you can choose to have, but we’ve also got some things that I feel really good about as far as the nutritional level and profiles, and then also the flavor its great.” I mean, we want to get to cuisines around the world with flavors, and that’s just gonna be a bonus, so. So I can watch that now and feel less bad...

Deanne: ...yeah. [laughs]

Steve: ...our contribution or participation in it.

Peter: One of the fun parts of this project over the past year or so is getting to meet intelligent restaurant people in little towns, and I’m wondering how those conversations have gone for you, with other folks who trying innovative restaurant ideas or just trying to make it something a little different in small towns.

Deanne: We haven’t had a chance to interact with those restauranteurs yet; however this project that we, Steve, mentioned: the farmer-chef specials that we do, we have purposely tried to reach out to other restaurants and say, “Are you interested in doing that kind of thing, so it can be bigger than us?” So they can buy a local product from a farmer locally or from a farmer’s market and then feature that item and then offer those recipes to their customers. Because we feel like it’s a way to get to know other restauranteurs that are passionate about
this, and we don’t even know if they exist at this point. We’re guessing that a few do because of some of the people that we know.

**Steve:** We can’t be the only ones.

**Deanne:** And you probably know since you’ve been out here in Southwest Minnesota. You can probably get us names of people. But anyway, just, we haven’t had those conversations because we weren’t restauranteurs maybe. We’re not connected with the community—I don’t know...

**Steve:** ...yeah we’re fairly recent, four, five, six years—whatever. It has been nice, though, to get to know some of the growers, some of the people behind the food. That’s been really great, because they share some of the same similar values and outlook as we do. I mean, they’re just as crazy as we are. Bucking the current conventional systems. [Laughing]

**Peter:** [laughing] Some of them are much crazier.

**Steve:** I mean it’s all varying degrees, but it has been nice, really nice, to be able to get to know those people. We attended the MOSES conference this year in LaCrosse, the…

**Deanne:** Organic Farming Conference.

**Steve:** Midwest Organic Sustainability conference, 3,100 or 3,200 people there, and yeah, it felt comfortable. It was nice every time we sat down for a meal. It didn’t matter who was at the table; we always had a really nice conversation. It was just a really good place to be. It felt so different from our urban stuffy corporate days. I mean, you couldn’t get any more different than that, so that was very comfortable and comforting to be around those people. So as far as restauranteurs go, we haven’t really had the chance yet to get with that many like-minded people, but we have with growers and those who produce the food.

**Deanne:** I guess the only one really that we connected with is—there is a little coffee shop over in St. Peter, River Rock.

**Steve:** Oh yeah, they’re doing some really good stuff.

**Deanne:** ... and they’re doing some really good things. And then there’s a place in, is it Windom?

**Steve:** Yeah.

**Deanne:** Okay.

**Steve:** River City.

**Deanne:** River City, so because some of the farmers that we’ve interacted with have mentioned that one.
Steve: Right, right.

Deanne: And there’s Pasoma, we have interacted with Jill a little bit who owns Pasoma but haven’t talked, talked to her about this project yet, which we will do.

Peter: So is this farmer-chef thing your idea, or is it something you signed onto?

Deanne: It’s an idea that we had when we decided to plant the garden. We thought: wouldn’t it be cool, cause a lot of chefs are using farms, but you never see the chef actually be the farmer, and so we thought, oh it would be cool, ’cause he is first a farmer, and then he became a chef, so it’s like okay, then let’s try it and see and then—you know a cook. It doesn’t have to be a professional chef. Somebody who...

Steve: ...I envision this more for somebody whose just...

Deanne: ...moms and dads...

Steve: ...yeah, grow some food and the other things people grow a garden, and the proverbial thing is that they got zucchinis coming out of their ears. But so a lot of people grow a garden, and what do I do with it? What do I do with the produce, you know, so number one, you can incorporate your ingredients as they come seasonally but also with preserving, and we did some recipes on some produce from the garden, that we had preserved, whether it’s freezing or canning. Yeah, so the original idea is not so much for restaurants to be farmer-chef but for everybody to be farmer-chefs. Take some of that lawn, get rid of it, put in some raised beds, grow some food, and then during the season, at least, cook with what’s coming from the garden.

Deanne: And even if you decide not to grow it you know go to a farmers market...

Steve: ...go to a farmers market, yeah....

Deanne: ...or join up and get a...

Steve: ...CSA...

Deanne: ...a CSA box. And then you’ll know what to do with it. So the whole idea is to have restauranteurs, chefs and restauranteurs model that, so when people come in to just get what they normally get, they’re seeing it and they’re thinking, “Oh, huh,” you know, and then you can have conversations with people “Do you ever go to a farmers market?” “Well, I never know what to do with the stuff.” “Oh, well, we have these recipes,” you know, so just having that conversation. And we want it to be bigger than us...

Steve: ...oh yeah, yeah.

Deanne: ...its just an idea that we had...
Steve: ...so you’re growing food, learn how to cook with it, and enjoy food.

Peter: Food supply. I mean, I see the great big Cisco trucks driving around. They’re like, you know, gas trucks: they pull up, and you load up this—you know essentially—these varied spouts of corn syrup and fat and salt. It turns into whatever it is you cook. So when you’re doing something different, are there problems getting ingredients?

Steve: Well if you were to build a restaurant and I think certain restaurants try to do 50, 60, 70, 80 or whatever percent organic or local or some sort of combination thereof, it’s really tough. I remember reading an article one time, and this restaurant was down south—it wasn’t in Minnesota—but, this restaurant was actually growing the food that they served in the restaurant and some customers came in July. I think this was in Alabama....

Deanne: ...it was in Georgia...

Steve: ...Georgia. It’s hot in July in Georgia and they came in and they wanted salad, they wanted a lettuce salad. And she said, “I’m sorry, we don’t have that,” and they were full out disgusted with that. They couldn’t understand why during the growing season they couldn’t have lettuce in July. And that’s the disconnect we have is that people don’t understand that...

Deanne: ...It’s too hot to grow lettuce...

Steve: ...It’s too hot to grow lettuce! Lettuce is a cool season crop; you can grow it in the spring. You can grow it in the fall...

Deanne: ...and you can grow it really late into the fall we discovered.

Steve: ...You can scrape the snow off....

Deanne: ...yeah...

Steve: ...you know, light snow off, but you know that’s what we want people to do is to connect with food, to understand how it’s grown and you know, as I said before, honor it, respect the people who are actually growing.

Deanne: But as far as getting food, it’s hard.

Steve: It’s really hard yeah. Seasonally, it’s tough. I mean, this is Minnesota; the growing season is extraordinarily short...

Deanne: but even just getting food for this new menu that we’re creating has been hard, because we wanted to try to get things that didn’t have high fructose corn syrup in it.

Steve: ...It’s tough to find in food service...
Deanne: ... and we couldn’t get any ice cream toppings that didn’t have any high fructose corn syrup in it. So we decided: we’re gonna try making them.

Steve: ...right. We used to offer, you know it was a drive-in, standard American diet drive-in, we offered all the ten different toppings. This year: two, maybe three. Chocolate, strawberry, and maybe caramel—depending how my success with browning sugar is. That’s it! That’s gonna disappoint a lot of people.

Deanne: ...and we did find soft serve...

Steve: ...we did find some soft serve that does not have high fructose in it and should you or shouldn’t you, I don’t know, but....

Deanne: ...those just are choices that people make. But from what we’ve read, we don’t feel good about offering it, because high fructose is processed different, is that right?

Steve: ...yeah and its metabolized by your body the same but because it’s in different percentages. It leads to different metabolites, let’s just say, or the same you don’t necessarily want …

Peter: Must make for some interesting conversations. I mean I look to the right, I look to the left, this is corn country. [laughs]

Deanne: We haven’t had those conversations yet [laughs], so we will have some interesting ones.

Steve: Yeah, there will be some corn growers in.

Deanne: But we have had some interesting conversations about wheat and that actually turned out ok—with a farmer that grew up in an area that grew wheat. Because the wheat has changed, and that’s what’s leading to some people’s intolerances to wheat.

Steve: they speculate.

Deanne: They speculate. It’s all speculated. But then when we talked to the farmer who had grown wheat when he was young, and how wheat is now, he’s like, “Yeah you’re right, it is different. The wheat is changed.”

Steve: Yeah I mean it will be interesting. Here we are in the middle of corn and soybean country, and here we are attempting to use ingredients that are less dependent on corn and soybeans. It will be an interesting conversation but it just feels like the right thing to do. We may have different thoughts about that in the future but…

Deanne: [laughs].

Steve: For right now it feels like the right thing to do.
**Deanne:** We’ll see what happens.

**Steve:** Well I don’t think it’s actually a conversation that’s going away. Just the other day, I heard a major grocery chain is at least attempting to demand that all ingredients, all GMO ingredients, are labeled. That’s monstrously huge so…

**Deanne:** Yeah.

**Steve:** I don’t think it’s something that’s a bubble or going away. When we closed, we said that we wanted to do the things differently if you will, and we had somebody ask us, “Don’t you think that’s a fad?” And my comment was, “It may be a fad, but what’s not a fad is the state of health of the United States and it’s change over the last 20, 30, 40 years.”

**Deanne:** With food becoming more and more processed.

**Steve:** For whatever reason. Whatever it’s attributable, whatever ingredients, there have been a multitude of things that have changed in the last 20, 30, 40 years but it’s irrefutable the state of health with chronic disease in the United States, that we spend as much or more than I think any country in the world on health care. At the same time, our population is one of the least healthy in the world. It’s something, something has happened or is happening that you know—what do they say is the definition of insanity, doing the same thing over and over and expect a different result? And I guess Deanne and I don’t want to be...

**Deanne:** We’ll just be insane in a different way.

**Steve:** Exactly. Crazy! Not insane, crazy. Crazy in a different way.

**Deanne:** Yeah, we’ll be crazy instead of insane.

**Steve:** Yeah, that’s right. So something’s gotta change, and neither one of us is a biochemist or a nutritionist by training, but with enough reading, you being to question certain things. I guess that’s where we’re at.