

10-28-2000

## Interview with Robert Tier

Molly McNamara

Robert Tier

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digital.kenyon.edu/elfs\\_interviews](https://digital.kenyon.edu/elfs_interviews)

---

### Recommended Citation

McNamara, Molly and Tier, Robert, "Interview with Robert Tier" (2000). *Interviews*. 67.  
[https://digital.kenyon.edu/elfs\\_interviews/67](https://digital.kenyon.edu/elfs_interviews/67)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Foodways at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).

Accession Number: ELFS-MAM-A102800.A

Researcher's Name: Molly McNamara

Event: Interview with Robert Tier, co-owner of Gambier Village Market

Place: Gambier Village Market

Co-workers present: none

MM: This is Molly McNamara interviewing Bob Tier on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2000 in the...I'm sorry, in the Gambier Village. When and how did you get started in your business?

RT: Which business? This store or any store?

MM: Well, this store in particular.

RT: 1993. January of 1993 was when we officially took over the market.

MM: And who did you take it over from?

RT: Ben Durban was the man who was here, the previous owner. The owner before, five years before that, was his father-in law, Art Arnold, who worked for Jim Hayes, who was the owner in the present state since 1963 when they built Farr Hall. And Mr. Hayes also owned the property that they built Farr Hall on, so then there was, because there was a market here on this spot before they built Farr Hall. They tore it down. So then I imagine part of it was to put a market here. You know, to replace what was there, since he sold them the property.

MM: OK, I just want to make sure this is working [the recorder]. Yeah it's working alright. And so you haven't always worked at this location?

RT: No.

MM: And where did you work before this?

RT: In the grocery store, grocery business. I was a meat-cutter, meat-cutter/ meat-manager for eighteen years.

MM: And what made you decide to come here?

RT: Just to go into your own business. Be your own boss.

MM: And what do you like about being your own boss?

RT: I don't know if I've got an answer to that because I always came and went as I pleased with those other jobs. But, you know, when you're responsible for...the bottom line being your own boss, sooner or later it's going to benefit you. You're not working

for someone else. You're the one who's going to reap the final harvest. It may not be 'til thirty years from now, but you're still going to.

(Robert's partner Roger came back with a note and said, "You have about ten roles")

MM: Um, and why did you decide to go into this particular business?

RT: Into this particular business? Here? Mainly because when you look to go into any business, no matter what, any type of retail or any type of business, you want to have some longevity. You know, that you're going to be guaranteed that you can get your, for one your investment back, and for two be able to make a good living, or a living. And this was what you would consider probably the most captive audience that could be found, say in this county. You know? But it still takes a lot of work to keep it going and going up.

MM: Um, and what exactly does your job entail? Specifically, like how do you split the work between the two of you because you are partners, correct?

RT: Right. There's no designated: you do this. You know? It's just from the time you open the door it's you're either running the cash register, you're working the produce, you're filling coolers, you're mopping the floors. I'm cutting meat; Roger doesn't cut meat. You're making sandwiches, de de de de de de de de de [signifying etc.]. Everything that anyone else who works in the store does, we do at one time or another. Just for instance, who was here this morning? The two of us. Course, then we also have this circle, which is, you know, the entire bookkeeping. So, we just...whatever gets done in here, we have to do one time or another. That's it.

MM: OK, and how many people work here?

RT: Nine.

MM: How do you divide the work between the rest of them?

RT: It's not divided amongst anybody. It's just that you're either going to be working at the cash register, or you're going to be working say theoretically back here at the deli counter. You know? So you're station is going to be in one of those places to be at that place for customer service, and if you're the person who either on the front end, anything on the front end if you're not run...if nobody's here, then you have whatever else responsibility there is: straighten the store, fill up the coolers, wipe off the counter, on and on and on. And in the back, the person in the back has the rest of the store. If you're not doing anything, then, you know, get busy. There's always dust.

MM: There's always dust everywhere. Um, and how do you choose which items to sell and which specific brands?

RT: It's a turkey shoot. I mean you could...sometimes we think we have some almost too much stuff, and then you could, instead of taking, having three choices of beans, have one. But then you could carry more items instead of multiples, different kinds of one. But, most things like that are just on a national trend. You know the curve that this is the number one seller, you have to carry it.

MM: So do you, do you keep research as to what national trends...

RT: No, somebody else does that. That, you know, you get...you belong to different grocery associations. They're always sending you the information.

MM: Could you explain the, a little more about the...I'm sorry, the grocery organizations that you're talking about?

RT: Well, there's any, there's all kinds of them. There's Ohio Grocer's Association, there's the East Central Ohio Grocer's Association, there's Central Ohio Grocer's Association. These are all just factions of the grocery industry that basically, they do things like group...grouping together for workman's compensation, group health insurance, lobbying, you know, to try to get things done through the food industry. It's just no different from any other industry. These people are the ones that are, could be called, you know, the grocer's union. You know, but this is for...most of the people that are in those organizations are, are independent, you know. They're not...even though your major chains are members of those, but then, because they need protected too, but for the most part of it, it's a lot of independents, especially the smaller organizations. And it's there job then to relay information to you about the industry. That's why you pay your dues. You know? It's not a free service. You pay, no different then you would for a magazine subscription. You know, but you're going to gain information from them at one point in time that you can use. Lots of times it just goes over your shoulders. You know, but there are some things there that you, you know, that are valuable.

MM: OK. And how do you decide what prices to set for your items?

RT: The prices are set...some are set by the state of Ohio. Anything that you deal in alcohol has to be set per what they say. You know? And then the rest of all the prices are set on a curve that you have to make, you can't lose money. But when you pay employees, you pay employees workman's compensation, and the employees that we have that work full-time, we pay their insurance in full, which is quite costly. So.

MM: OK. And how often do you change what quantities to buy your items in or what products you sell?

RT: As in whole new items or...

MM: Well, either.

RT:...change in something, you know, different? Weekly.

MM: Weekly?

RT: Yeah, I mean, there might be something new in here weekly. You know, just something that someone would say, or new products, anything, so you have to change, you know, due to the fact that advertising, little advertising campaigns make things...impulse into people's heads that, "yes I want to buy that," whether it's any good or not. Mikey likes it.

MM: And who are your customers?

RT: Our customer base probably runs within fifteen miles of, probably fifteen mile circumference of the whole store, so that would be 750, you know, 7 ½ miles either way, which would entail Mt. Vernon, almost half way to Fredericktown, down towards Howard. All those little different directions, plus the people within the village. And of course, the student base would be a large part of it. That's when we're open the most. When the students aren't here, we're not open. We are open, but not as extensive hours.

MM: During the summer you mean?

RT: Um-hmm.

MM: OK, and how often do you interact with your customers?

(The bell rings)

RT: Ninety percent of the time. Let me slide through here. You can turn that off because if the bell rings, I'm up.

MM: OK

(The tape is shut off.)

MM: Um, I'm sorry, I was asking you, how often do you interact with your customers?

RT: Ninety percent of the time, probably. If you're the one working at the cash register, then it's a hundred percent of every customer.

MM: True.

RT: You know, and if you're the one back here, then I'd say that fifty percent of the people might get something from the counter back here. Or another twenty-five percent, you may ask, "may I help you find something?" Or someone may ask you something, but especially...someone in the store a hundred percent of the time. Maybe not everyone in the store, but someone in the store will interact with a hundred percent.

MM: And why do customers come to your store specifically?

RT: That part I just...because it's here. You know, just say because it's here. They need what we have, hopefully, but because it's here.

MM: But why would you think that they would come here versus another store?

RT: I would say convenience in the long run. You know? The...hopefully there's some things that we have here that other stores don't have. You're not going to be able to go into most stores and walk up and get a sandwich, a hotdog, whatever. We try to provide what other full-service grocery stores do, but it's obvious we don't have the space or need to have the amount of product that the rest of them have because, you know, there's no way we can do the same amount of business. It's numbers. You know, if five people spend fifty cents, then you only need ten candy bars. If three thousand people spend fifty cents on a candy bar, you need five thousand, you know, to cover what's going to come in. It has nothing to do with price or anything else. It had to do with how many do come, come in. You know, if you only have one person, you don't need fifty cans of beans. You only need, say ten cans of beans because within a certain period of time that person may buy all ten cans of those beans, ok?

MM: Right. And, I'm sorry...I forgot what I was just going to say. How many people do their major shopping here, do you think?

RT: Major shopping? I would say a very small percentage. Major shopping has changed so much over the years. When Mr. Hayes and Mr. Arnold owned the store back in the sixties and seventies, a can of soup was ten cents at every market, no matter where you went, before the age of extreme competition that if I buy six, I get it for a nickel. If I buy fifty-six, I get it for two cents. So, the competition thing changes a whole bunch. People will drive fifty miles to save five dollars on their groceries, but they just spent ten dollars on their gas. You know? So price is...price has restructured the grocery industry. So therefore, the amount of people that do their entire shopping here is very, very small. A lot of pick-up items, a lot of things you know, that, you know, from here to there. But then if you saw those same people at a larger grocery store, then they're buying hundreds of dollars worth compared to, you know, twenty dollars worth. Just because you could check, just randomly pick fifty items, and the prices...within probably ten cents. You know, number-one, name-brand items, the prices would not fluctuate all that much. But then the expanse of a big grocery store, which is why they build them that way, you know, to lure you in to go through and get the things. And then they also run, you know, price-off items. Sale items all the time. That doesn't mean that everything else is not priced accordingly.

MM: Right.

RT: People like big.

MM: And how does your operation...I think you might have answered this...how does your operation relate to larger food stores?

RT: I think I just answered that. At one time, there was in Mount Vernon alone, when I was a kid, there was a grocery store within every one- or two- block area. You know, one room, meat counter, little deli counter, hamburger, bread, eggs, milk, soup, of course a candy counter, you know, for every little kid that walked in, but there, that used to be the trend. You know, people just walked over to the corner store. It was just like in a little...in a house. And there was probably thirty of 'em. I think there was like twenty-three of 'em in Mount Vernon alone and that's only a town of thirteen thousand people. But you can go in any town in the USA, and I can drive through the town and pick out where the markets used to be. So, the markets...it was just big business took over.

MM: Where does your food come from?

RT: Suppliers. Most of it comes from just, you know, one grocery supplier. Just like any...that would back up and pull up and anything else, so that all the food that's on a national scale, it's the same difference. You know, someone else is just warehousing. You want it, they bring it.

MM: What suppliers?

RT: Pardon me?

MM: What suppliers?

RT: I don't want to tell

MM: OK, That's fine. And in particular, do you know where it's coming from, from the suppliers?

RT: Where are they getting it from? Same place any other grocery store in the United States is getting it. You know, they're buying it from the manufacturer. They're taking it to their warehouse, you're ordering it, and they're bringing it to you. That's just the same system. That's...just because it's food, it's no different than anything else.

MM: Does all your food come from a supplier?

RT: Ninety percent

MM: Ninety percent? And where does the rest of it come from?

RT: Just from other different suppliers that handle specific items that, you know...you can't get everything from...your beers and wines have to come from a distributor. Your ice comes from a distributor. Your dairy products all come from a different distributor. You know, your basic...all your food stuff is the big group one. You know, your cans, your paper, your sugar, cigarettes, candy, all that stuff is through what would be a

grocery supplier, you know? But then everything else that you see, you know, produce, candy. There's all different little suppliers that there is their niche in the grocery business. That's what they supply to the grocer.

MM: How much of your food is locally produced?

RT: Miniscule percentage. Just so small. We may carry, carry a lady's hydroponic (?) tomatoes that's grown down the road. You know, and that's only a six-, seven-month thing because that's all the time that she does it. Most of the times that we've tried other local suppliers on produce and some other things like that, the problem you run into is that their supply isn't as good as your demand. You know, because they're not big enough. You know, one day, you may need ten of them; they only have two. And then the customer wants to know why, and you can't say because the supplier can't supply it. You are the one at fault. You're the one who put it in there to begin with. So you have to realize after a certain period of time that if it can't be supplied at the quantity that the customer needs, which one day they may only want one, one day they want ten, but you have to have the ten. You can't take...we've done it. There's just too much of a chance on most of those things that you can't...now other things like maple syrup...we've had local honey, and then a couple of the people passed away and don't do the honey any more. There's things like that that change, but for the most part, no.

MM: What do you see...you discussed this a little bit, but what do you see as the benefits of selling local food. You talked about some of the liabilities. Are there any other liabilities?

RT: The benefits of selling local food? Well the only benefits of selling local food are, you know, that you know that the product is local. People come in looking for local, especially in a college town when there are visitors. They're looking for something that is produced most of the time in Ohio, but there's a ton of national products out there in the store that are produced in Ohio. But anything that is real local would be most of the time fresh: produce, you know, different items like that. Maybe even getting in, you know, animals, but that won't work either. So there's not that many advantages right here because I don't think it can be supplied.

MM: Those are all the questions I have, so is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to say?

RT: I can't think of anything. Is there anything that's not on your question list that you want to ask for your own information.

MM: Not that I can think of.

RT: Huh?

MM: Not that I can think of.



RT: No? You totally understand the grocery industry now? Or do you totally understand how grocery would interact with the community?

MM: Not completely, but I'm...is there anything else you'd like to say about that?

RT: No, I'm just trying to switch the tables on you.

MM: OK, do you know of anyone else that I might want to talk to about this?

RT: Is it just for the grocery industry or is it for interacting with the community, period?

MM: Interacting with the community. I guess I should explain. We're going to...we're trying to find out about interests in local foods and local markets, like food markets and how food works through the community, where the food goes to, what food is brought back into the county. And we want to see if there's an interest in forming more local food markets and see where the interest is there, how...what people see as the benefits of that or the liabilities, or just to see people's views and see if this is something that could work.

RT: My biggest thing is just going to supply and demand. You know, that's the biggest thing. I'm going to say that what they're doing is...can you supply the demand, you know? Can you supply the demand? I have brown eggs from free-range chickens. Well, they're not laying this week. Well, I've got fifty customers in line that want brown eggs, so I've got to go elsewhere to get them, so it's going to economics. It has nothing to do with how it's going to interact. It is economics. Supply, demand. Demand must meet supply. That's it.

MM: So would you know of anyone else that I...we're hoping to talk to farmers and restaurant owners and grocery store owners and just...if you don't it's fine, I was just wondering if maybe you had...

RT: Just the obvious ones that are right here. And you know...the other thing you could do is contact some people in Mount Vernon. You know, but if you want to stay closer, but Mount Vernon's four miles away. It's not that far. That's the only way you could do it. And I don't know much more that they would tell you because they're just on a bigger scale. You know, so I don't know how much more information you're going to gain about the same thing but they're going to... the bottom line is going to be supply and demand.

MM: OK, well I think that's all I have. Just let me turn this off.

End of tape.