

ANDREW'S BAR-B-Q

7532 1st Ave. North
Birmingham, AL 35206
(205) 833-9123

"I was chef [at the] Gold Nugget [restaurant], which was about—seat about three hundred people. And used to cut a lot of meats--butcher--fish, everything. It was the most exclusive place, those years. In Birmingham."

–Aleck Choraitis

Aleck Choraitis, owner of Andrew's Bar-B-Q, came to Birmingham from Greece via Venezuela in 1957. He got into the restaurant business the first day he got to town, when he began work at his father-in-law, Bill DeMoes's restaurant, La Patee. From there Aleck spent some years as chef at another Greek-owned restaurant in town, the famed Gold Nugget (now closed, many maintain that Harry Alexiou introduced fine dining to Birmingham with this restaurant and his popular burnt butter spaghetti). Andrew and Jimmy Morris (also Greek) opened Andrew's Bar-B-Q in the 1940s, and Aleck bought it from them in 1969. After that, Aleck bought Gus's Hot Dogs from its original owner, Gus Alexander. (George Nasiakos now owns Gus's Hot Dogs; Aleck invited George down from Chicago to take over the hot dog stand, since Aleck wanted to devote his time to Andrew's Bar-B-Q). It's a family affair at Andrew's Bar-B-Q and, while it's definitely a barbecue joint, there are also traditional Greek-style chicken and southern vegetables on the menu. Ironically enough, Aleck's particular brand of 'que is always requested by his family when he travels back to Greece, where he also maintains a house and olive farm.

Full Interview Transcription:

Aleck Choraitis, Owner
ANDREW'S BAR-B-Q
7532 1st Avenue North
Birmingham, AL 35206
(205) 833-9123

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
DATE: March 10, 2004 @ 2:30 p.m.
LOCATION: Table in back of restaurant.
LENGTH: Approx. 20 minutes

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here. Mr. Choraitis's daughter is sitting at the booth next to our table, visiting with friends. They are up and about the restaurant frequently and constantly welcoming new arrivals. The restaurant has a handful of customers who can also be heard, along with the female server and some faint music playing in the

background. **See George Nasiakos interview for more information on Gus's Hot Dogs.**

* * *

Amy Evans: Okay, this is Wednesday, March tenth, two thousand and four. And I'm at Andrew's Bar-B-Q and--

Aleck Choraitis: Correct.

AE: --would you mind stating your name and your--

AC: Aleck.

AE: --age, if you don't mind, for the--

AC: Aleck, A-L-E-C-K. C-H-O-R-A-I-T-I-S, Choraitis. [He pronounces this *Kor-ah-tiss*]

AE: Okay, and were you born in Greece?

AC: Yes.

AE: Where?

AC: In the south part of Greece, Peloponnesus.

AE: Peloponnesus.

AC: The south part of Greece.

AE: Okay, and when did you come to Birmingham?

AC: Nineteen fifty-seven.

AE: Alone or with the rest of your family?

AC: No, I met my wife. I met my wife in Venezuela, and then I came here.

AE: In Venezuela?

AC: Um-hmm.

AE: What took you to Venezuela?

AC: Because I can't come straight here.

AE: Okay.

AC: And then, my wife was American citizen, so she have to come down there and marry me, and then six moths later I come here.

AE: Okay.

AC: Yeah.

AE: And why Birmingham?

AC: Because my wife's family was here.

AE: Okay. And you just decided to stay.

AC: Right, of course.

AE: And your wife is Greek?

AC: Yes.

AE: Yes. Okay. And you got here, um, did you get into the restaurant b—business immediately?

AC: Right away. The first day.

AE: And where was that?

AC: La Paree restaurant downtown.

AE: What was that?

AC: La Paree.

AE: La Paree? Okay.

AC: Um-hmm

AE: Was that a Greek-owned restaurant?

AC: Yes.

AE: Who owned it?

AC: It was owned by, uh, my father-in-law and his brother, Bill DeMoes.

AE: Bill DeMoes. Oh, okay. I've heard that name.

AC: Yeah.

AE: Okay. And then, um—how long did you work there?

AC: Uh, I work there to sixty-three.

AE: Okay.

AC: Nineteen sixty-three.

AE: And went where?

AC: And then I worked in, uh, Gold Nugget restaurant—for nine years.

AE: And that was Harry Alexiou, right?

AC: Harry Alexiou owned it. Harry and John and—everybody. It was three brothers.

AE: What did you do there for them?

AC: Cook, chef.

AE: Okay. And then they closed, I've heard.

AC: Uh, yeah. They were before—

AE: What year?

AC: The original place burned up. And the other place closed, uh [short pause] let's see, I came here sixty-nine, about seventy-one, seventy-two, something like that.

AE: Okay, and then from there--

AC: They closed down.

AE: --where did you go?

AC: Right here. [Beats on table for emphasis]

AE: Here to Andrew's Bar-B-Q.

AC: And I'm still here.

AE: Yes, you are. So was this already established as a barbecue restaurant--

AC: Yes.

AE: --when you got here?

AC: Yes.

AE: Who was the owner then?

AC: It was two brothers: Mr. Jimmy [Morris], Mr. Andrew Morris.

AE: Morris? M-O-R-R-I-S?

AC: Right.

AE: And they're—

AC: It was two brothers.

AE: --not Greek?

AC: Yeah. Yeah, it was Greeks.

AE: They are?

AC: Um-hmm. Yeah.

AE: Oh, Okay. Okay, and how did you get to own the business? Did you partner with them for a while or—

AC: I bought it.

AE: You bought it—

AC: I bought it from them.

AE: --outright?

AC: Friend of mine help me out to—bought it.

AE: Okay, and what year was that?

AC: Nineteen fifty-seven.

AE: Nineteen *fifty*-seven?

AC: I mean, uh, sixty-nine. I'm sorry.

AE: [Laughs] That's okay. That's okay. Um—

AC: I'm thirty-four years here, babe.

AE: And how—are you—or how were you affiliated with Gus’s Hot Dogs downtown?

AC: Hot dogs? I used to own at one time.

AE: Okay. Did you own these two—those two places simultaneously?

AC: Yeah—no, no, no. Uh, I owned this one, and then I bought that one downtown.

AE: Uh-huh.

AC: And then my son-in-law was there, Jim Morris. And then I sold it to George [Nasiakos] about five, six years ago. [Sniffs]

AE: Okay. So how did you—how did you manage two restaurants? [Short pause] Or what—why did you want to manage two restaurants?

AC: Well, it was easy.

AE: Yeah.

AC: My wife was working with us here and everything. And then my son had it, my son-in-law had it, and it was sold to George.

AE: Okay.

AC: Um-hmm.

AE: And now you’re here full-time at Andrew’s Bar-B-Q.

AC: Thirty-four years. Thirty-five.

AE: My goodness. Um, and let me ask you a little bit more about the hot dog place.

AC: Yeah.

AE: Um, the hot dog history, um, in Birmingham is really unique. Can you talk a little bit about running that place downtown.

AC: Well, the hot dog--used to own by a friend of mine.

AE: Uh-huh.

AC: And his wife. And then they moved to Greece, and then I bought it—from them.

AE: Why did they move to Greece?

AC: They wanted to—they didn't have no kids. They just want to stay in Greece instead here.

AE: Okay.

AC: They moved. Okay?

AE: Did you like the hot dog business?

AC: Oh, yeah. It was good.

AE: Yeah?

AC: Big business. Good Business. Like George does right now. Real good place.

AE: And how about, um, that famous sauce that goes on all the hot dogs here?

AC: The sauce? It was a one from the guy before.

AE: Yeah?

AC: Which named Gus. That's where the name comes. He had about two or three place here in town.

AE: Gus Alexander, is that right?

AC: Gus Alexander. Right. Um-hmm.

AE: Okay. And he developed his own recipe for the sauce?

AC: His own recipe for the sauce, correct.

AE: Yeah? And he—he gave that recipe—

AC: To us. Right. Yeah.

AE: Okay. And, um, can you tell me anything about Gus's history? Where he came from in Greece? Or if he was born here?

AC: Mmm, the guy was a Greek guy but born and raised here.

E: Oh, okay.

AC: He was not original Greek.

AE: Okay.

AC: But his parents was Greek.

AE: Do you know when he originally opened Gus's Hot Dogs?

AC: Ooh, it got to be, uh [short pause] sixty-three, something. Something like—long time ago. [According to the information in George Nasiakos's interview, Gus's Hot Dogs has been open since the late 1940s.]

AE: Okay.

AC: Um-hmm.

AE: And that sign that's on the side of the building by the parking lot there?

AC: Yeah.

AE: That's still there? Um, that looks original to the restaurant, is it?

AC: Mmmm, I don't think so.

AE: No?

AC: I thought George fix it.

AE: Okay.

AC: Mmm, something—Coca-Cola people fix it for him.

AE: Yeah? Okay. Okay.

AC: Now—

AE: Now how did you—how did you know George?

AC: I knew through my brother in Chicago. And he wanted a brother here. Start working with me for a while. That's when he decided to buy it.

AE: Okay.

AC: And he does good job.

AE: Yeah. He seems to like it over there.

AC: Good job.

AE: He's a nice man.

AC: Mmm, good place.

AE: Um, okay. So you sold the—Gus's Hot Dogs to George.

AC: To George.

AE: And then you came here to Andrew's.

AC: I *was* here.

AE: You were here.

AC: Oh, yeah. From sixty-nine.

AE: Okay. And who is the Andrew?

AC: Andrew was two brothers. James and Andrew Morris.

AE: Morris, okay.

AC: This place here like sixty years.

AE: Okay.

AC: And then they sold to the lady, and her husband died—forty-nine years old—and then I bought it from them, sixty-nine.

AE: Um, and it—tell me about this neighborhood. We're in East Lake?

AC: Well, this is East Lake, you know. Most of them is the black people.

AE: Uh-huh.

AC: You know?

AE: And we're near Sloss Furnaces. I passed on the way out here—

AC: Yeah, I been there too.

AE: --so it's pretty industrial—

AC: Twenty-sixth Street, yeah.

AE: --industrial neighborhood?

AC: But this traditional family place.

AE: Yeah?

AC: Like fifty years ago, used to be the Sanford University up here in Seventy-seventh Street?

AE: Okay, okay.

AC: They used to have business with all this, uh—what you call it—uh—[knocking on table to think]

AE: Students?

AC: Students!

AE: Yeah.

AC: Um-hmm.

AE: Okay. Um, and so—do you live in this neighborhood also?

AC: No.

AE: No?

AC: No, I live in Vestavia [a suburb of Birmingham].

AE: Vestavia—I just drove form Vestavia.

AC: Yeah, yeah.

AE: Okay. And so—how—tell me a little bit about this business and this place and having a barbecue restaurant.

AC: Like I say, this business here is established family business. We got—a—kids—Bring their kids and kids and kids.

AE: Um-hmm.

AC: [Coughs] I used to give them, uh, candy—all those little kids. Traditional stuff here is, uh, banana pudding. We make a big banana pudding every day. We give them first come, first served. No--no charge. The sauce is original.

AE: The sauce?

AC: Yes.

AE: Okay.

AC: The cole slaw is one of the best here in town. And, uh, the sign outside. The running pig they call it.

AE: That's a great sign.

AC: Yeah.

AC: Matter of fact, had some boys from UCLA one time--here and national magazine --it was in there.

AE: Really?

AC: Same pig running for fifty-something years.

AE: [Laughs] Really?

AC: They call him "Running Pig."

AE: [Laughs]

AC: You can have a picture if you want to.

AE: Um, well what is it like being in the--in the barbecue business. I mean, that's something that's quite--that's quite a--a resume--

AC: Well--

AE: --to have worked at the Golden--

AC: Years--

AE: --Nugget and then come do barbecue and hot dogs.

AC: Years ago, south Birmingham was real famous for a lot of barbecue places. The city for barbecue. Not like, uh, Georgia and Tennessee. Not--Birmingham's--you might say we got about twenty-something places, barbecue places.

AE: Yeah. And di--are you the pitmaster in the back? Do you have a--a pit and smoke all the meat?

AC: I got a lady works with me, sixteen years old.

AE: She's sixteen years old? [This was a misunderstanding. The subject is revisited later in the interview, when it is realized that she has been at Andrew's Bar-B-Q *since* she was sixteen years old]

AC: She makes the sauce, she make the pies—of course we've got, besides the barbecue, we've got like a six vegetables.

AE: Uh, huh.

AC: Four meats a day. Change it.

AE: And chicken and potatoes, I see.

AC: Well, this is a Greek-style chicken. [Pounds table]

AE: Uh-huh. Greek-style chicken and—

AC: Honey, we change—we change every day. [Pounds table]

AE: Yeah.

AC: Four meats and six vegetables, besides the regular menu. [Pounds table]

AE: Do you have other items on the menu that are Greek? Or Greek-style?

AC: Oh, once in a while, yeah.

AE: Yeah.

AC: Potatoes and [short pause] What else do we usually do? Greek-style chicken, Greek-style potatoes—I mean, not too many. You know.

AE: Uh-huh.

AC: This is not a really Greek restaurant. I just try to mix them up a little bit. Because you've got regular people.

AE: Yeah.

AC: Like eighty percent. We get a lot of people from, uh, military up here in the airport. And lot of construction people, lot of family people and everything. So they like to change. They can't eat barbecue every day.

AE: Yeah. Yeah.

AC: Yeah.

AE: Um, and what is—what is, um [short pause] Your family works here, obviously, I see.

AC: Well, the only one—

AE: That's your son? [Working behind the steam table]

AC: The only one--No, he's my nephew.

AE: Your nephew.

AC: Yeah. And your is daughter sitting here behind us.

AC: Well, all them just visiting.

AE: Okay.

AC: Just happened to take my mail home, and so I'm here and so they came by.

AE: Yeah. Okay.

AC: All my kids and grandkids and grandkids kids, you know. See all those pictures up there?

AE: Uh-huh, I do.

AC: All this kids, grandkids and grand-grandkids. Its just like I say, like a family place. You allowed to do what you like—like who you like, you know. Florida State, Auburn, Alabama—fanatic, people here, for college football.

AE: Fanatic football fans?

AC: Like me.

AE: Yeah? [Laughs]

AC: Yeah.

AE: So, um, how do you explain the Greek tradition of owning restaurants here in Birmingham? Any insight--

AC: Well, really—

AE: --into that?

AC: Really, the Greek people, they not only own the barbecue places, they got the good places. You know, real exclusive places, with the Greek dishes and all that. The salad, uh, what you call it—the Greek salad and everything.

AE: Um-hmm.

AC: But most of the Greeks in the restaurant business. That's what you own.

AE: Yeah. Yeah.

AC: Italian and Greeks own this town.

AE: And you like this business, I can see.

AC: Well, right now, I mean, I don't have to work, but I here because, uh, I like to do something.

AE: Um-hmm.

AC: I don't like to sit down. Everybody's stresses my family, "Quit, quit!" But I told them I'd go crazy.

AE: Yeah.

AC: Time to go home. Stay home, do what?

AE: [Laughs]

AC: Touch my wife? No way!

AE: [Laughs] Does your wife come in here regularly? Does she work or help out?

AC: Used to.

AE: Yeah.

AC: When I first bought it? Used to work with me all the time. But now, no. She stays home.

AE: And do you attend the Greek Orthodox Church downtown?

AC: Yes, ma'am. Been baptized, all my kids, we're members of the Greek Orthodox Church. Got good service on Sunday and got a—school for the kids and everything.

AE: Yeah. They went to Greek school--

AC: Um-hmm. Yeah.

AE: --growing up? Wonderful. [Short laugh] Lots of regulars, obviously, come here.

AC: Oh, yeah. Eighty-percent of people come here—

AE: Yeah.

AC: --they're regular customers. Good customers. No whiskey, no beer, no nothing—no problem.

AE: Yeah. Um, well would you mind telling some stories about your days working at the, uh, Gold Nugget or some other restaurants in town?

AC: Oh, that's going back. I was chef there, and I was working in, uh, Gold Nugget, which was about—seat about three hundred people.

AE: Three hundred, yeah?

AC: And used to cut a lot of meats--butcher--fish, everything. It was the most exclusive place, those years. In Birmingham.

AE: Yeah.

AC: And it was owned by the three brothers—two brothers: John and Harry, you know that.

AE: Yeah.

AC: And then the original Gold Nugget burned down, and then we opened one by the Vulcan.

AE: Yeah, yeah. In Homewood.

AC: And then we had, uh, next to it, it was Armando's restaurant—Italian restaurant.

AE: Armando's?

AC: Yeah. And then, Johnny die and Harry die and—people die. It was three brothers—there's two--two left out of those three.

AE: What about the rest of downtown Birmingham and all the restaurants that—

AC: Well, the most fabulous place was—was, uh, John's restaurant, which not anymore. The most successful place at night is Niki's. Niki's West.

AE: Yeah.

AC: That guy died too [Gus Hontzas] and took—now his sons there.

AE: Um-hmm. What about—

AC: They do big business.

AE: Yeah, I was there yesterday.

AC: Yeah. Plus, all the big outfits, you know, down on [Highway] 280?

AE: Yeah.

AC: You know, the different outfits. Every day they open something.

AE: Yeah.

AC: Down there.

AE: Um, and what about Pete's Famous Hot Dogs? Do you know Gus over there?

AC: Oh, yes! He's there—uh, Gus is about seventy-five years old. He's a millionaire.

AE: [Laughs]

AC: He took off—one time he left and —to go to Greece. Because somebody force him. And he's still there [at Pete's Famous], he and his wife. And I don't know what the hell he's going to do with the money. No kids, nothing.

AE: Yeah. Yeah.

AC: I guess he'll give it to his sister. [Short pause] And he's still there. His all—his uncle used to own that. Years back.

AE: Um-hmm.

AC: So he went to Greece, and he died there, and he [Gus] took over.

AE: Um-hmm. Have you been back to Greece?

AC: Oh, every year almost.

AE: Every year, really?

AC: Yeah, I got a lot of relatives. I got a house in Greece, and I've got a farm in Greece. And we go almost every year.

AE: Really? What do you farm over there?

AC: South part.

AE: Yeah?

AC: in Greece.

AE: Yeah. You have olives or—

AC: Oh, yeah. I got about six hundred olive trees.

AE: Yeah.

AC: I got it from my aunt. And I bought me a little condo in Athens.

AE: In Athens.

AC: Athens, Greece. Got a sister live there, and my brother is there. You know, a lot of nephews and everything.

AE: Have any of them visited you here?

AC: Oh, yeah. Once in a while.

AE: Yeah?

AC: They do.

AE: Do they like it here?

AC: Oh, yeah! They love it.

AE: [Laughs] Do you feed them barbecue?

AC: Oh, yeah.

AE: [Laughs]

AC: They eat the barbecue. Matter of fact, when I go to Greece, they want me to cook barbecue too.

AE: Oh, really? [Laughs] Um, well when you go to Greece, how long do you stay for a time?

AC: A month, two months sometimes. Especially after August. 'Cause I own a motel down in Panama City with my brother so--

AE: You own a motel in Panama City, Florida?

AC: Yeah, Panama City. Yeah.

AE: Okay.

AC: Um-hmm. Me and my brother, we own that.

AE: Interesting. And—

AC: Matter of fact, I got a brochure right there. [Points to a menu on the table next to us]

AE: What's the motel business like?

AC: Good.

AE: Yeah?

AC: Good. We got sixty-two room we rent in the wintertime to the snowbirds.

AE: Yeah?

AC: And in the summertime for three months, we rent it daily.

AE: How did you get into that business?

AC: We just bought the property, me and my brother. Long time ago.

AE: And he lives there?

AC: No, no, no. Me, my wife and Jim, they take care of it—they stay about three, four months, and we've got a manager.

AE: Oh, okay. Oh.

AC: Have to do that.

AE: Well you have lots of irons in lots of fires.

AC: Oh, yeah.

AE: [Laughs]

AC: Yep!

AE: Talk about staying busy.

AC: It is. We stay busy.

AE: Yeah.

[Aleck's daughter screams across the restaurant]

DAUGHTER: Hey, Gus!

GUS: Yes?

AE: So, what else can you tell me about the restaurant business here?

AC: Want to make it busy— [Aleck begins speaking in Greek to his nephew Gus, who is behind the counter. Gus responds in Greek. Aleck's daughter responds in English]

DAUGHTER: That's okay.

AE: [Laughs]

AC: I'm talking Greek.

AE: I know. [Laughs]

AC: Yeah.

AE: Um, can you—do you have any good stories about being here at Andrew's Bar-B-Q after so many years?

AC: Well. Like I say, it's—I meets a lot of people—regular people. They come by. I have good times in here. No problems, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

AC: I love what I'm doing, you know.

AE: Yeah.

AC: That's—I enjoy it. At this rate, I don't want to give up the place, you know?

AE: Yeah. Are you open--

AC: But if I try to—Oh, we're open six-thirty to seven.

AE: You have breakfast, lunch—

AC: For breakfast.

AE: --and dinner.

AC: Yeah.

AE: Are you open seven days a week?

AC: Six.

AE: Six?

AC: Closed Sunday. Saturdays three o'clock and Sunday we close.

AE: And how many other employees do you have besides your nephew.

AC: About seven, eight.

AE: Okay.

AC: Yes.

AE: So tell me about this girl who does your barbecue and your sauce and everything. How'd you find her?

AC: She was sixteen year old when was worked for the original person.

AE: Okay.

AC: And she's still here. She's sixty-eight years old.

AE: Sixty-eight years old, okay. What's her—

AC: She's still with me.

AE: --name?

AC: Uh, Eva Coleman.

AE: Eva Coleman. Okay.

AC: See most of my employees is with me.

AE: Yeah.

AC: Except when they die—they gone.

AE: [Laughs]

AC: I lost bunch of them.

AE: It's nice to have loyal employees for sure. And it—

AC: Yeah, we're lucky—lucky, you know. I keep my employees—steady and everything.

AE: Is the [short pause] décor in here original? Outside of--

AC: No, no. I do a lot of remodeling here like the ceiling and this here, floors. No, it was not like that.

AE: Yeah?

AC: After the years.

AE: And you put on all the football memorabilia, I presume.

AC: I love that.

AE: Uh-huh.

AC: All the sports here, and all those little kids that bring me picture here put on the walls and everything.

AE: Well, good.

AC: This is like a family place.

AE: Yeah, yeah. It's a great place. I'm—I'm really glad that George called you up and had me come out here. I never would have found it.

AC: This is not, uh, an executive place, this good family place. [Beats his fist on the table for emphasis]

AE: Yeah. No, it's really nice—

AC: No beer, no whiskey, no nothing. We try to keep straight and—

AE: Uh-huh.

AC: --clean. [Pounds table with fist again]

AE: And you have a--do you have a really mixed clientele from the neighborhood?

AC: Oh! Yeah, we got blacks and whites. That's all right, don't know body know.

AE: Yeah. Um, what was Birmingham like during the Civil Rights Movement when you were working in these restaurants?

AC: Mm, well it was like a—most of the place, you know, like the department stores?

AE: Department stores?

AC: Never—all the stores, department stores, they have a water for blacks and water for white. And the buses was half inside there. And, uh, sometimes they can't eat, you know. You know, they can't sit down and eat. They had to take them out. It was pretty rough, those years. You know?

AE: Did you serve blacks and whites during that time?

AC: What?

AE: Did you serve blacks and whites during that time?

AC: Well, I serve—you know, nobody had no choice. Had to take it to go, but not inside the restaurant. Then when George Wallace messed with that Alabama College. Remember that—

AE: University of Alabama? Yeah.

AC: This what changed everything around. But to me, anything I learned was that black people, they love me to death. I don't have nothing against them.

AE: Yeah.

[Short pause]

AC: Matter of fact, I think they'd kill somebody for me because I always treat them and everything. I—I don't have no big problem, 'cause we Greeks too.

AE: Yeah.

AC: We're foreigners too. Long time ago they didn't like the Greeks either.

AE: Yeah.

AC: But everything's gone now, you know. I think God made everybody. I don't care the color either. And especially South was tough with the black people for those years. You know, it was not like the North.

AE: Well Birmingham's come a long way.

AC: Uh-huh. Yeah.

AE: Okay. Well, is there anything you'd like to add that I didn't ask.

AC: No, darling. That's all. I enjoyed talk to you.

AE: Okay. Well, thank you.

AC: You take care. Okay, bye!

[END]