

NIKI'S WEST : Betty Hontzas

233 Finley Ave. West
Birmingham, AL 35204
(205) 252-5751

"When I was growing up, knowing my daddy was in the café business and how confining it was—when I was about fourteen or fifteen, three things I did not want to marry: I did not want to marry anybody in the restaurant business, I didn't want to marry anybody born in Greece—because I thought they had old-fashioned ideas—and I didn't want to marry anybody with black hair. And I married all three!"

–Betty Hontzas

Gus Hontzas came to the states from Greece and landed in Jackson, Mississippi, where his uncle, John Hontzas, had a restaurant called John's. When the Hontzas family opened up the Niki's restaurants in Birmingham (Niki's Downtown opened in 1951 and Niki's West opened in 1957), Gus headed to the Magic City to run Niki's West. Gus passed away in 2001, but his sons, Pete and Teddy, run the place today. The cafeteria line at Niki's West is legendary. Mid-morning you can find folks in line, piling their plates high with some of the freshest and most colorful vegetables in Birmingham. And if the cafeteria line isn't your style, they also have an a la carte menu where you'll find even more fresh seafood, steaks and a few traditional Greek dishes. Most folks who pass in front of the steam table at Niki's West might be surprised to know that there was a lounge in the back of the place in the old days. And evidently, the lounge (and yes, Mrs. Hontzas confirmed it, there was a go-go dancer involved) was where part of the expanded kitchen is today. If those walls could talk!

Full Interview Transcription:

Betty Hontzas, widow of former owner	INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
NIKI'S WEST	DATE: March 9, 2004 @ 11:00 a.m.
233 Finley Ave. West	LOCATION: Booth in main dining room
Birmingham, AL 35204	LENGTH: Approx. 15 minutes
(205) 252-5751	

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: customers in the booths next to ours can be heard talking, servers can

be heard walking past and talking to customers, and the bus cart can be heard rolling by. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

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Betty Hontzas: --taking up lunchtime when it's busy.

Pete Hontzas: Get your—get your—uh--

BH: Yeah. Yeah. Shhh. [To Pete] All right.

Amy Evans: Okay, I'm still—

BH: Okay. [To Pete]

AE: --here at Niki's West with Pete Hontzas and his mother Betty Hontzas [Birthdate: August 21, 1937]. And she's just joined us at our booth and is kind enough to spend a couple minutes answering a few questions about her time at Niki's West with her husband [Gus Hontzas] in the restaurant business.

BH: [Laughs] [Clears throat]

PH: Follow along. [To his mother]

AE: And, um, could you just maybe tell us some of your fond memories about, um, being in business with your husband.

[Short pause]

BH: [Laughs] I loved my husband, but I would never be in business with him again—with the children involved.

AE: Yeah, it's hard work.

BH: Never. I know.

AE: Yeah, so you dedicated—

BH: Because I was always in the middle of--when he would fuss at the kids, I was always in the middle. I always tried to smooth things over, and I would never do it again.

[Short pause]

BH: [Laughs]

AE: Well do you have any particularly fond memories of being part of the restaurant?

BH: [Laughs] Oh, yeah! Oh, yes! [Laughs] Um—well, I enjoyed, um [short pause] I—at the times when I was hostessing, I used to enjoy that. And, um, [short pause] I enjoyed the times when my husband was in a good mood.

AE: [Laughs]

BH: Which was—rarely. A lot of times. Wasn't it, Pete? [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

BH: But, um [short pause] And I enjoyed meeting a lot of the customers and talking to them, you know.

AE: Um-hmm. Do you cook?

BH: But it's—Not here at the restaurant, no.

AE: Do you cook at home?

BH: Y—yeah, uh-uh. Not too much now because I'm by myself but—

AE: Yeah.

BH: You know, when the kids were growing up I did cook. Yeah.

AE: And I was asking your son about the days when there was a lounge in part of the restaurant.

BH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, those--

AE: Do you--can you tell us a little bit about that?

BH: Um, that was around the time my husband and I met and married back in the early sixties. And, uh, there was a lounge in the back, and they had a go-go dancer at night.

[Waitress comes buy to fill our water glasses. Sound of water being poured over ice.]

BH: [Clears throat]

AE: Thank you. [To the waitress]

WAITRESS: Thank *you!*

BH: But, uh, after my husband had his first heart attack he, um—after his heart surgery—when he came back he decided to remodel and enlarge the restaurant. And so the lounge was gone, and it became a dish hall—a part of the kitchen. And he added this dining room we're sitting in now [the main dining room adjacent to the cafeteria line]. And then, after his second heart surgery ten years later, he added n—the next two dining rooms.

AE: My goodness.

PH: You're not telling it right, Mother. But anyway, go ahead.

BH: I know, I'm sorry.

PH: I can do this. I—I can tell her about that better. Eight—

BH: He added the first two—

[Sound of microphone being turned to point towards Pete.]

PH: After he had his first heart attack—

BH: [Clears throat] [Short laugh]

PH: He contemplated on where he should—how to get the people from downtown—would anybody come to this side of town to eat? And he got—he felt like they would, and he got talked into it, and he did it. So in eighty-two they built this dining room we're sitting in now. Still had a lounge but no go-go dancers though.

BH: [Laughs]

PH: Just a little—little lounge. And then we, uh—and then he said, "I'm going to take care of the lounge, and I'm going to do away with it. And I'm going to do it better now. I'm going to build another dining room, make a dish hall, do my stock room a little bit bigger and have an area for people to work in." That they could work more efficiently. So in eighty-four they did—that was probably the l—the largest remodeling job was the eighty-four job. When they opened the dining room, the dish hall, and made the kitchen a kitchen instead of a go-go lounge or a lounge and put a baker's side. You know, you have a baker's side, a kitchen side and you were able to do more things.

BH: A side for the salads and—you know.

PH: Yeah, all that kind of thing. And in ninety-one we did that back dining room, remodeled the front area where everybody comes in at. And that's how—that's how it—

BH: Um-hmm.

AE: Well, since the lounge is gone, do y'all still serve alcohol at all or no?

BH: Only with meals.

PH: When people ask for it. I mean, if they want it, you know—

BH: Yeah.

PH: We'll serve it to them but--

BH: Only with meals.

PH: --we're not here for alcohol, we're here for food. So—

AE: Okay.

PH: I think what happens is the people who want to drink just alcohol, they're not going to be able to do it. And—it's like anything else in life, if you're not wanted, you find yourself going out. You know. You, um—you don't go to a place you're not wanted just to be there.

AE: Yeah.

PH: So. Your client—you know.

BH: Oh, that reminds me. When I was—when I first started working down here—of course, you can't picture how the—it was just a café. And right there at the entrance where the people are coming through? That was the door to come in and out. And it was just a café with several booths and some tables and a stool—bar stool, where people would sit and drink beer. And the first time I served a man a beer [short pause] He was sitting on the--the counter stool, and I served him a beer, and he gave me a fifty-cent tip. And my husband made me—he said, "That goes in the register." He wouldn't let me keep it.

AE: [Laughs]

BH: [Laughs] Said, "That goes in the register!"

AE: So have you—

BH: [Laughs]

AE: --worked as a cashier here and a hostess—

BH: Uh-huh. Yeah.

AE: Any other capacities or—

PH: You learn here to do all of it, whether you want to or not.

BH: Except—and I never cooked here, no. But I did—

PH: You had to do all of it.

BH: --everything else.

PH: If somebody tells you to do something, you just do it. Period.

BH: Yeah.

PH: Whether it's get a table—If you're a cook and you see somebody--you're short of help?

BH: Well, when he was—

PH: I mean, we'll bring cook—if we have to, we have to, you know

BH: Yeah.

PH: You do what you got to do.

BH: I even—I—cleaned bathrooms when he [Gus Hontzas] was in the hospital with his first heart surgery because we didn't have a clean-up boy. We were short, and I had to clean the bathr—well, it was just, what? One bathroom, but—yeah.

AE: How often are you here now? Do you come every day?

BH: No, every day but Friday and Saturday. If they need me, you know, but I'm sort of semi-retired.

AE: Yeah.

BH: I'm trying to enjoy myself a little bit now.

AE: Yeah, but is it hard to stay away after so many years in the restaurant business?

BH: Well [short pause] I enjoy coming down.

PH: [Laughs]

BH: But there are times when, uh [short pause] There are times when like--when I want to take a trip? They know that I'm going to be gone, so they have to make arrangements.

AE: Yeah.

BH: Like, I'm going to be gone quite a bit this spring—hopefully.

AE: Where are you going?

BH: Um, well, let's see. The end of March I'm going to New Orleans with a cousin for four or five days. And then in, uh, the first of May my daughter [Margo] and I and her baby are going down to, uh, Florida. That's a mother and daughter thing we do every year. And then, hopefully, May sixteenth we're going to Austria. We're taking a tour to Austria.

AE: Oh, wonderful.

BH: Yeah.

AE: Have you been to Greece?

BH: Oh, yeah. Four or five—about four times. Yeah.

AE: And may I ask your maiden name?

BH: Fotinos. [Mrs. Hontzas pronounces this *Fo-teen-us*]

AE: Could you spell that?

BH: F-O-T-I-N-O-S.

AE: Okay.

BH: Uh-huh. Yeah, I'm full-blooded Greek. I was born and raised here but my—both my parents are Greek—were Greek. And I went to Greek school and learned how to read and write and speak Greek.

AE: Do you still speak Greek?

BH: Yeah.

AE: Yeah?

BH: Um-hmm. In fact, my girlfriends and I speak more Greek with each other than I did with my husband.

AE: Really?

BH: Um-hmm.

AE: And what did your parents do here?

BH: My daddy had a café.

PH: [Laughs]

AE: Where was that?

BH: [Laughs] It was—[laughs]—it was—

PH: What is that? Everybody—

BH: --called the Three Star Café.

PH: All of them do it!

BH: Three Star Café. It was just a small little place but—

AE: Where was it?

BH: Twenty-three hundred Second Avenue North.

AE: Okay.

BH: It's now a parking lot. [Laughs]

AE: Do you remember or have you heard about a place called the Lamb Bone Restaurant? That was on Fifth Avenue North, I think.

BH: Um, I've heard about it.

AE: Okay, because I—

BH: I—a Greek had that.

AE: Yeah, I read something about it.

BH: Yeah. I don't--I—I remember it. I don't think I ever went there, but I hear about it, yeah.

AE: Okay, because I heard [that] the proprietor could, um, could tell the future by reading—

BH: The future by the lamb [bones]—yeah! Uh-huh. I wish Nick were here, he'd remember that.

PH: Yeah.

BH: But I'm—I didn't—I didn't know the gentleman. I don't remember him.

AE: Huh.

BH: Yeah.

AE: Well what was Birmingham—ham back—like back in those days when your family had that restaurant downtown?

BH: To m—uh, downtown Birmingham was a lot better than it is now--to me. Uh, it was a lot safer, it was just, um—we went to movies downtown, we went to eat downtown, went window-shopping—

PH: People went nuts downtown.

BH: And—it was—you know, after a movie even in the evening you could go window-shopping. Walk around the department stores outside, and they had beautiful displays and the—just things that you can't do now.

AE: Yeah.

BH: But—

AE: And what kind of food did your parents serve at the café?

BH: Uh, similar to this cafeteria. It wasn't a—a Greek-type food. It was a—

PH: Southern cooking.

BH: Yeah, but not—not as big as this cafeteria. We had about—maybe six vegetables and about four meats. And—

AE: And when did they come to Birmingham from Greece?

BH: Uh, my mother was, uh—my mother was born in Chicago. But when she was about two, her father took her to Greece for six years. And then she came back, went to, uh—back to Chicago, and when she and my daddy eloped, they settled here in Birmingham. Now my daddy was from Greece. He was born in Greece—he came to this country in—twentieth—nineteen twenty-four [short pause]. Maybe twenty-three. And he—

AE: Where in Greece was he from?

BH: Um, he was from one of the Ionian Islands. One of the seven islands. It's called Ithaca. It's in, uh, you know the legendary Ulysses was from Ithaca, so that's where he was from. It's a beautiful island. Uh—

AE: And you still have family over there?

BH: Uh, my dad had a sister living—the first time we went to Greece, I went to visit her. She was a hundred and five when I met her. And she died at a hundred and ten.

AE: Oh my goodness.

BH: Yeah.

AE: Wow.

BH: Yeah. And--

AE: Well how did you meet your husband?

BH: [Laughs]

PH: [Laughs]

BH: Oh, golly! [Short pause]

PH: Tell the story, Mother.

BH: Well, it's—

AE: [Laughs]

BH: It's kind of, uh, you know—it's

AE: [Laughing]

PH: [Unintelligible phrase]

BH: --complicated. Um, at the time his first—this is his first cousin, Jimmy Hontzas, was engaged to a girl here named Patsy. And the rumor goes around that my husband had seen me at a party that was given in Patsy and Jimmy's honor. And he asked Patsy and Jimmy for their wedding, since he—my husband was going to be the best man—he asked them to put me as the maid of honor. So we could—you know, uh—

PH: Hook up.

BH: --be together. Yeah. [Laughs]

PH: What they call it nowadays.

BH: [Laughing] Yeah, hook up. Like Zoë says [Pete's daughter, her granddaughter]. And, um—and from then on it just, you know, kind of developed. And we got engaged, let's see—this was—Patsy and Jimmy married in November? No, they married in January. We got engaged in February and got married in May. So we were—

AE: What year again?

BH: M—sixty-four.

AE: Okay, so he was already—

BH: May—may of sixty-four, yeah.

AE: This restaurant was already very well established by that time.

PH: Well, for what it was, yeah.

BH: Yeah.

AE: Yeah.

BH: It was just a café. A small café then. It was—

PH: A hole in the wall.

BH: --nothing like this! Yeah.

AE: But it had been open, what? Like six years or something?

BH: Fifty-nine. Nineteen fifty-nine.

PH: Fifty-seven, Mother.

BH: I thought it was fifty-nine, Dear.

PH: It was fifty-seven.

BH: [To Pete] Well, excuse me, Darlin. I could do without that cigarette. You're choking me.

PH: I know it. Terrible, isn't it?

AE: So did you know that you were marrying into the restaurant business that would grow to be this?

BH: Yeah. We'll, the odd thing is, when I was growing up, knowing my daddy was in the café business and how confining it was—when I was about fourteen or fifteen, three things I did not want to marry: I did not want to marry anybody in the restaurant business, I didn't wasn't to marry anybody born in Greece—because I thought they had old-fashioned ideas—and I didn't want to marry anybody with black hair. [Laughs] And I married all three! [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

BH: That was—that was just a young girl's, you know—thought that, you know—I didn't want to do this, I didn't want to marry this, and I wound up marrying all three. So.

AE: It seemed to work out well on all accounts.

BH: Oh, yeah.

AE: [Laughs] Well, do you have any other memories hat you'd like to add that—

BH: [Laughs] I don't think you want to hear all the—

PH: Nah, you don't want to hear all of it.

BH: [Laughs] No, I don't want her to hear all of that. [Laughing]

AE: [Laughs]

BH: But, uh, like I said, I would not do it again. As far as working *with* my husband and the kids in here, no. I would not do it again. I didn't—well, what—the funniest thing when—I got to tell you this. The funniest thing, when his partner Jimmy [Hontzas, who left the restaurant in 1976] left and then the whole place was left to my husband, I begged him, I says, "Well let me come down until you find a cashier," you know. "A couple weeks, and I'll help you out." "No, no, I don't want you to work, I want you--." So I begged him. He said, "All right. You can come down for two or three weeks until I find somebody." And that was all she wrote!

PH: Um-hmm.

AE: [Laughs]

BH: He never found anybody! So I'd come down for two or three hours a day until I had to pick up the kids from school, three hours became five, five hours became six, and pretty soon it was an eight-hour, nine-hour day.

AE: Yeah.

BH: Yeah.

AE: Well, what do you hope the future of the restaurant will be. [Short pause] Do you have a hope for the future?

BH: I hope—and I know the boys will make it s—continue to be a success, but I hope for them that they can cut their hours and have more time—relaxing time. That’s what I hope.

PH: That won’t happen.

BH: Why not? Why not?

PH: Because it’s too much now.

BH: You can. Don’t ever say never.

PH: No. Yeah, you ain’t kidding about that.

BH: Mmm-hmm. [Laughs]

AE: All right. Well, I know y’all are getting busy here with the lunch rush, so I appreciate you stopping to spend some time with me and tell some stories from your perspective.

BH: [Laughs]

AE: And, uh, thank you very much.

BH: You’re welcome.

[END]