

**Beba & Tasos Touloupis  
Ted's Restaurant  
Birmingham, Alabama**

\*\*\*

Date: January 25, 2017  
Location: Ted's Restaurant, Birmingham, AL  
Interviewer: Eric Velasco  
Transcription: Technitype Transcription  
Length: Two hours, twenty-four minutes  
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

(Note: This interview takes place in the dining room as employees close for the day.

Occasionally sounds like squeaky door hinges are heard in the background.)

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:00]

**Eric Velasco:** So this is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Tasos and Beba Touloupis. It’s January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017. We’re sitting in a booth at their restaurant, Ted’s, in Birmingham, Alabama. It has been at its current location at [328] 12<sup>th</sup> Street South since 1973, but its history dates back even farther. Please introduce yourself.

[00:00:31]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Hello. I’m Tasos Touloupis.

[00:00:36]

**Eric Velasco:** Would you spell your name, please, and give your date of birth?

[00:00:37]

**Tasos Touloupis:** T-a-s-o-s, Tasos, Touloupis, T-o-u-l-o-u-p-i-s. I was born February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1957.

[00:00:49]

**Eric Velasco:** And you?

[00:00:49]

**Beba Touloupis:** I’m Beba Touloupis, B-e-b-a T-o-u-l-o-u-p-i-s. I was born August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1968.

[00:00:58]

**Eric Velasco:** All right. Thank you. So where were each of you born, and tell me how to spell where it is, and where was it within the country?

[00:01:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I was born in Greece in a city called Thessaloniki, so I’m a Thessalonian, which is pretty famous in the Christian world. It is in the northern part of Greece. It is near the water. It’s a beautiful city, population about—it was 1.2 million. I’m assuming it’s a lot larger by now. I lived twenty-one years there and then I came here.

[00:01:39]

**Eric Velasco:** What brought you here?

[00:01:41]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Education. I went straight to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1978, and after overcoming cultural shock for about a month, I adapted pretty good.

[00:01:56]

**Eric Velasco:** Interesting story about how you came to go to Alabama. Tell me about it, please.

[00:02:01]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The process of admission at the universities in Greece at the time was so difficult. The admission requirements were enormous. We had to take a test, and one out of fifty people were admitted to a particular university of the government’s choice, because education in Greece, as you know, or you might not, is free. So I was not very lucky attempting twice to get admitted, so I set my wings to fly over the big sea and come to the United States and proceed to my degree.

[00:02:41]

**Eric Velasco:** And how did you choose the University of Alabama?

[00:02:45]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I became very close friend to the American consular. We used to have an American Embassy, not the main office—of course that is in Athens—in Thessaloniki. During my career as a high school student, I was working in some good restaurants, white-tablecloth restaurants, the way we define it here in the United States, and I became very good friends with him. He advised me, he guided me, and he told me that I was going to go be a little more comfortable in the South because of the hospitality, rather than moving north or east or west. It is a true story. He gave me the book of all colleges at the time. I opened the first page, University of Alabama was number one in alphabetical order, and I submitted all my applications to the university, and the rest was history.

[00:03:51]

**Eric Velasco:** And they were one of the first to respond, I think?

[00:03:54]

**Tasos Touloupis:** They were the first to respond. I didn’t even proceed to another choice. I had another choice to go west in Los Angeles and in New York. I didn’t even pursue it. I considered it a waste of money because at the time I had to submit an application fee. So I said, “Enough.”

[00:04:14]

**Eric Velasco:** And you mentioned that you worked in kitchens in fine-dining restaurants back in Greece. What capacity?

[00:04:21]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Primarily I was in the front of the house. I worked in resort areas, hotels, since I was fifteen during the summer. I was raising some money. And I was traveling in Europe during the winter holidays, during Christmas, I was making good contacts throughout Europe, and I visited several countries in my youth at the age of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, till I came here. So that helped quite a bit to shape my personality and also give me a little courage that if I can travel around Europe so easily, I can go to the U.S.

[00:05:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Gave you the confidence to do that?

[00:05:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Believe it or not, I was brave, ignorant, and confident. [*Laughs*]

[00:05:16]

**Eric Velasco:** Takes a little bit of all three, doesn’t it?

[00:05:18]

**Tasos Touloupis:** All three, especially the ignorant part, because I never had a clue what I was going to face over here. And as the song goes, “Number one is the loneliest number.” I was very lonely the first semester here, and then I adapted and made some friends, some connections. But it was difficult.

[00:05:42]

**Eric Velasco:** How about your background?

[00:05:44]

**Beba Touloupis:** I was born actually in Freeport, Grand Bahama in the Bahamas, to Greek parents. My grandparents had come over to Nassau in the 1920s for sponging, so they started the sponging community in the Bahamas. And my mom came to Nassau in 1950s from Greece, so I’m a first-generation Bahamian, Greek Bahamian, so that’s my—

[00:06:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Had they been involved in sponging back in Greece?

[00:06:10]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, my grandparents. My grandfather was a sponger in Kalymnos. So the Kalymnos group, they left, either went to Nassau or they went up to Tarpon Springs. So our group went to Nassau, Bahamas. We were lucky enough to be in Nassau.

[00:06:23]

**Eric Velasco:** And what were your parents’ and grandparents’ names?

[00:06:27]

**Beba Touloupis:** My grandfather’s name was Nikolas Mangos. His wife was Kiriaki Mangos. So they were settled in Bahamas. [spells names]

[00:06:51]

**Eric Velasco:** And the town they were from or village they were from?

[00:06:53]

**Beba Touloupis:** In Kalymnos, in the island. They were islands. And my dad was actually born in Nassau. They had two kids born in Greece and two in Nassau, and Dad was born in 1930 in Nassau.

[00:07:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, were they recruited to go start sponging there or just saw an opportunity?

[00:07:10]

**Beba Touloupis:** They had the equipment, and their equipment was advanced compared to what they were using here in the U.S. and on the islands. So they had the equipment, they brought the equipment over, and they started their own sponging business.

[00:07:25]

**Eric Velasco:** And for people not familiar, what is involved in sponging?

[00:07:29]

**Beba Touloupis:** I'm not really 100 percent sure about it, but I do know back in the day they had to literally—they formed new suits and new headgear, and they had to go dive and get the sponges, and they brought them back up and they treated them and they sold them.

[00:07:43]

**Eric Velasco:** So they were pretty deep dives.

[00:07:44]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, it was a deep dive. It was dangerous, so it was not an easy task. And then after they settled, just like all the Greeks tend to do, more family members came. They started expanding. My grandfather had a bakery, shoe stores, restaurants. They just started settling, and there's a big community in Nassau still. They built the church like in 1935. My dad was about five when they built the church, and it's still there.



[00:08:13]

**Eric Velasco:** That seems to be one of the first signs of settlement in any Greek community, is the Greek Orthodox Church going up.

[00:08:20]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, absolutely.

[00:08:21]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, was your father involved in the sponging industry as well?

[00:08:26]

**Beba Touloupis:** So, no. By the time Dad came along, I think they had started moving into other businesses. I remember him talking about the bakery, and he was in the bakery. He would bake bread with my grandfather, and that was what he did, was a bakery and like a little grocery store. So they had moved on to doing more groceries. I think my grandfather probably got a little older, too, so he couldn’t actually keep up with the sponging.

[00:08:51]

**Eric Velasco:** And I guess the desire also was for far less dangerous work too.

[00:08:54]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, I would imagine so. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:08:58]

**Eric Velasco:** I would imagine for a lot of the early comers here, owning a restaurant beat working in the mine or the steel mill.

[00:09:05]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, yes.

[00:09:09]

**Eric Velasco:** So how long were you on the island?

[00:09:15]

**Beba Touloupis:** I was there until 1989, and I came to Birmingham. I came to school at UAB. We had a few connections here in town. My parents, we were settled in Freeport at that point, and I grew up in Freeport, went to school there, and I wanted to go to college. So I came over here in 1989, went to UAB, and graduated with a degree in psychology.

[00:09:43]

**Eric Velasco:** Let’s go back a little bit to Tuscaloosa here. You talked about trying to find your tribe, I guess, so to speak, there in Tuscaloosa. Did you have any contact with the Greek community here in Birmingham?

[00:10:02]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I didn’t know anybody, I was all on my own, so I ventured the trip on my own. After graduating from high school, I did a two-year what we might call here private junior college, because I wanted—I was recruited to go to the Air Force. In Greece you did not volunteer at the time. You had to go through the armed forces, and they would pick for you which branch to go to, Army, Navy, or Air Force. So I was chosen to go to the Air Force. That was done at the age of eighteen, so I went and got me a diploma as an engineering or a mechanic, aircraft mechanic, because I was fascinated with Air Force airplanes. That led me to come over here in the United States and pursue a degree in aerospace engineering.

The plan was genius, magnificent. At the time in 1978, the General Dynamics got into a consortium with the Greek government to build an aerospace industry to supply parts in the Middle East. The plant construction was going to take about four years, and I said, “Perfect. In four years I’ll have my diploma. I will come back in the United States and I will earn an American salary versus a Greek salary working for General Dynamics.” Also Lockheed was part of it. So the plan was perfect, but, of course, it was perfect on paper.

When I came over here, I got involved with Alabama football. [*Laughs*] I fell in love with the culture and so forth. I graduated. It took me four and a half years because I took off a semester to work, raise money, and continue my studies. So I graduated in 1983 with a bachelor’s of science in aerospace engineering, and right now I’m making collard greens. It takes a rocket scientist to do that, you know. [*Laughter*]

[00:12:26]

**Eric Velasco:** And what in your rocket science background do you bring to the collard green world?

[00:12:32]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The presentation, the aerodynamic form. If they’re not crispy, you know, from the local markets, the local farmers, I’m not using them. [*Laughter*]

[00:12:46]

**Eric Velasco:** What was it about the culture and the pageantry and all that of Alabama football that really appealed to you?

[00:12:53]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, my first introduction was halfway the first semester in 1978, Alabama was playing Penn State, and some Greeks that I met, there were a couple of Greeks, they invited me to go to the game. Of course, I watched the game, I thoroughly enjoyed the game, and they asked me the question, “Did you enjoy the game?”

I said, “Yes. Those girls, you know, were terrific.” I didn’t even watch a single play. I was glued on the cheerleaders and the majorettes, and I really enjoyed it. It was a [unclear] for me, never seen it in my life, first handed. So I said, “This is great.”

[00:13:38]

**Eric Velasco:** No cheerleaders in Greek football?

[00:13:41]

**Tasos Touloupis:** There’s no such a thing as cheerleading in what we call here now soccer. Used to play semi-professional soccer in Greece, and I wish I knew what I know now, because I would have just walked on to the late Bear Bryant and just say, “Hey, I’m a soccer player and I can kick the ball, not necessarily make all the field goals.” This is the joke, I should say, in the family. I tried to push my boys to learn how to kick the ball for a field goal, but we gave that up quickly and said, “Let’s stick to the scholastic rather than just football.”

[00:14:22]

**Eric Velasco:** Better chance of a scholarship that way? [*Laughter*]

[00:14:24]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Yes, exactly, exactly.

[00:14:26]

**Eric Velasco:** When did you come to the United States?

[00:14:29]

**Beba Touloupis:** So I came in 1989 and I came to UAB, started school, and I started a bachelor in psychology degree. I got connected with the Greek community through church. The Orthodox Church on 19<sup>th</sup> Street was so close to UAB campus. That’s how I became part of the community, and that’s how I met. We met Tasos at the church, lots of friends. I mean, UAB was right there. At the time UAB was more of a commuter school. We didn’t have the campus

it does now in 1989. So I worked. I went to school. It was a different experience. I didn’t have the traditional college experience, but that was one of my dreams, to come and get my degree. Unfortunately, not many of my cousins and my parents didn’t have a college degree, so I was the first generation to get a college degree. They were not happy when I left Freeport, they would much rather me stay, but you just have to pursue your dream, so I said, “I’m going to Birmingham,” and this is where I settled. Never looked back.

[00:15:34]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you get back to Freeport often to see your family?

[00:15:37]

**Beba Touloupis:** We used to go almost every year with the kids, up until about five years ago. They spent their summers, three weeks there in the summer. They enjoyed it. And then after so much time, they’re like, “Mom, can we see a different beach now? We’ve been here.”

I’m like, “You guys don’t know how lucky you are, though.” [*Laughs*]

But my mom now has sold her place and she’s with us, so it was time to bring her here with us. So now we don’t have—I’ve got family there on my dad’s side, but no need to go back as often.

[00:16:07]

**Eric Velasco:** When did your mom move here?

[00:16:08]

**Beba Touloupis:** She came officially last summer. She was with us back and forth for the past three years. She’d come and spend six months and then she’d go back, but now she’s with us full-time.

[00:16:17]

**Eric Velasco:** So tell me a little bit about the role that the Greek Orthodox Church has in the community as a whole. It seems to be a fulcrum for the whole community.

[00:16:28]

**Beba Touloupis:** It is. I mean, just the downtown location in itself, it’s in the heart of Birmingham. It’s on 19<sup>th</sup> Street. [Interviewer’s note: Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral is at 307 19<sup>th</sup> Street South. Birmingham’s city center extends 10 or more blocks on both sides of the railroad tracks that separate the north and south sides of Birmingham. The cathedral is on the south side of the city center. Commonly the word “downtown” is used to refer to the office district north of the rail lines.]

It has grown over the years. We have probably about 600 members, active probably over 300, 400 active members in the community. Of course, many of them are restaurant people, but there are also doctors and lawyers and accountants and just a huge array of people that are contributing to the community.

Of course, our Greek Festival every year is *huge*. It really is a way for the Birmingham community to learn about our culture, our food. We open the doors for the church. People come in and see the church, the Orthodox faith. So it’s a huge endeavor. I mean, they’re at the point

now where they close down parts of the streets of downtown to accommodate them. I wish I had an exact figure, but I think we probably serve about 25, 30,000 people in a three-day span. It’s crazy.

[00:17:24]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s probably one of the more popular festivals here in the city.

[00:17:28]

**Beba Touloupis:** I think it is. There are other food festivals, but it’s really hard to top the Greek Food Festival. It really is. And the really neat thing is, like, it’s a community affair. Like everybody says, “Well, did you cook that food?”

I’m like, “No, it’s a volunteer.” It’s like literally everybody in the church has a role, and everybody—either the old ladies are cooking, making the cookies, the guys are cooking the chicken. They’ve got the pit going with the souvlakia. I mean, it is literally *huge* teamwork. I mean, that’s like a team putting it together, and you never know what’s going to happen, but somehow by Saturday night, they all got it done, and it was amazing, amazing.

[00:18:07]

**Eric Velasco:** When is the festival held?

[00:18:08]

**Beba Touloupis:** It’s held like at end of September, beginning of October, but I think this year it’s end of September, like the last week of September, Thursday, Friday, and Saturdays.



[00:18:19]

**Eric Velasco:** How do they determine the date?

[00:18:20]

**Beba Touloupis:** Ha. Football games. [*Laughs*] If there’s a big Alabama or Auburn football game, they will not have it that weekend, because people will not watch it. They’ll be at the games. They will not come out and hang out at the festival if there’s a big football game on.

[00:18:37]

**Eric Velasco:** This is a ghost town, especially at Alabama home games.

[00:18:40]

**Beba Touloupis:** Especially Alabama home game. *No* festival at Alabama home game, absolutely not.

[00:18:45]

**Eric Velasco:** And just for the purpose of people listening, what’s the name of the church, please?

[00:18:49]

**Beba Touloupis:** It’s Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral.

[00:18:53]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s a merger of two congregations, I think, something like that?

[00:18:57]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, I do think it was. Now, I’m not very clear on that because that was before I was here, but I would say the two churches merged in the eighties. Holy Trinity and Holy Cross were two churches, and they merged, but I don’t know the exact information on that.

[Interviewer’s note: Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church was founded in 1906 and held its first service in 1907. Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church opened in 1933. The congregations merged in 1953.]

[00:19:12]

**Eric Velasco:** How did you two meet?

[00:19:14]

**Beba Touloupis:** Through the church, through friends.

[00:19:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** She was here, and when I met her, I invited her to go out to a movie and she said, “No.” And I got *really* upset and I said, “I’m going to marry you if I have to—.” And I kept asking her to go to a movie with me. She gave in three months after I was asking her almost every day. And then we became good friends and we maintained a relationship. Then a couple of years passed by, and we realized that we were made for each other. I have done crazy things

in my life, I have taken decisions for myself here and there that they proved okay, but that was the best one ever, ever.

[00:20:09]

**Eric Velasco:** What made you so certain? How did you know she was the one?

[00:20:12]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, I have twelve years’ difference with my wife, I’m older than her, obviously, and I enjoy life. I got married when I was thirty-seven. But the main reason was that the special thing that you call not necessarily love but the understanding was never there. It was more superficial. So Beba offered something a little more beneath the surface, even though she was a lot younger than me, and it was easy for me to decide to settle and settle with a girl that I can see a future and a family.

So the funny thing was, since she was from the Bahamas, I was from Greece, we didn’t have too many relatives, so I decided alone to take her and marry her in my hometown, Thessaloniki. So we flew to Thessaloniki, and I asked my sister, “Hey, I’m coming to Thessaloniki with my girl. Just prepare for a wedding.” *[Laughter]* So my lovely wife had her mother flown from the Bahamas to be a witness. A year prior to that, we lost my father-in-law to cancer. So the only family she had was a couple of cousins and aunties that used to live in Athens, so there were about four or five people. I had two hundred.

So in Greece there is a custom, after you finish the ceremony, which usually lasts an hour, and there is a receiving line where everybody congratulates the bride and the groom. Instead of doing it in a country club, we do it at a church, if that makes sense. It’s the same

thing. And I told my sister to advise everybody that the only gift we will take to the United States will be in the form of an envelope, and it better have some Euros in it. *[Laughs]* So my inside pocket was a little thick by the time the receiving line finished, great news.

And my wife, at the end of the receiving line, I said, “How are you feeling?” And I remember vividly like it happened five minutes ago, “I’ve never been kissed by so many strangers in my entire life,” because everybody was kissing the bride. Very few girls, ladies, kissed the groom, even though we’re a little huggy people, you know. The Greeks are known to be huggy and kissy.

So that was the beginning. So we came back here, and in four years we had my first son and then the second, and then the third one came unexpectedly because we were in negotiations, severe negotiations about controlling the family, you know, to the two boys. So Beba was not happy when she discovered that I sneaked in a little girl in the process of negotiations.

[00:23:46]

**Eric Velasco:** What are your three children’s names?

[00:23:49]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The oldest is John Theophilus. The two names are given to him in honor of one grandfather, my father is John, and Theophilus, my father-in-law. Theophilus is a biblical name. The other one is Alexios Nicholas, the same. And my little girl is Maria Katarina, Mary Katherine. Maria is my mother’s name and Katarina is my mother-in-law’s name. So we kept 99 percent of the traditions, as far as the family, but we adopted also the culture here.

[00:24:55]

**Eric Velasco:** Because that is a big thing, is naming children for relatives, right?

[00:25:02]

**Beba Touloupis:** Absolutely.

[00:25:03]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct. The immediate relatives, which usually are your parents or grandparents. So it is a nice tradition, instead of just opening a dictionary and putting letters together, and then the boy or the girl suffering spelling the name. Even though my name is two syllables, Tasos, but people have a little difficulty. The easiest thing you know to call me is “Tacos,” but I said, “No, no, no, please. I prefer enchiladas.” *[Laughter]* But Greek names are a little long, a little complicated, you know.

[00:25:40]

**Eric Velasco:** Who are you named for?

[00:25:42]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, my grandfather, my father’s father. My first name is Anastasios. Tasos is the short version, like Nicholas, Nick or Gregory, Greg, or David, Dave. So the Greeks keep the last portion of the first name as a nickname, or a short name, I should say. My name means “resurrection,” Anastasios, and my Name Day is on Easter Day, so everybody wishes me well because it’s Easter, but nobody remembers that my name’s Anastasios. *[Laughs]*

[00:26:20]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us what the Name Day is.

[00:26:23]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Greeks celebrate the Name Day because almost every day in the calendar we celebrate at the church a saint or, some days, multiple saints. Those saints that have the names that over the generations, over the 2,000 years we were in existence, they have been passed on to the children. So, i.e., John is the name for St. John the Baptist. Nicholas and Nicholais. Theophilus was a disciple of Christ. Alexios was the Son of God. He is a saint. My name is Anastasios, which depicts the scene of resurrection.

I remember over the years not only we celebrated birthdays, but we celebrated Name Days, so we had a double celebration. So what are you going to get me for my Name Day, or what are you going to get my for my birthday? Here we just celebrate birthdays, but at the Touloupis family, we celebrate also Name Days. So the kids, you know, got quite a few surprises.

[00:27:59]

**Eric Velasco:** I’m going to back up a little bit with you. Why did you keep turning him down?

[00:28:03]

**Beba Touloupis:** *[Laughs]* He was—

[00:28:07]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Tell the truth.

[00:28:08]

**Beba Touloupis:** He was awfully persistent, you know. He was persistent.

[00:28:12]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Because something was wrong.

[00:28:13]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yeah. I wanted to focus on school, I had no intentions of being with anybody, and he kind of wore away. He chipped, chipped, chipped, chipped, chipped away, and I was like, “Oh, my goodness.” So I finally said okay to that movie, and that was it. We’ve been together since then.

[00:28:34]

**Eric Velasco:** So how far along at UAB were you then?

[00:28:36]

**Beba Touloupis:** Third year? Third year?

[00:28:41]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I think she was a junior. She was a junior. If I may bring up something, when I first met her and we were just friends, she asked help with her algebra, and I said, “Fine. I still remember my math,” because I took a lot of math, imagine, in aerospace engineering. So I helped her. So she flunked it the first semester. The second semester I helped her again; she flunked it. Then the third semester, she gave up algebra and she took statistics. So she blamed me that instead of educating her algebra, I was educating her other things in life. So she was very skeptical.

[00:29:29]

**Eric Velasco:** Maybe if you’d done better on the tutoring, she’d gone out with you earlier.

[00:29:32]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct. Correct. I blame myself on that. Touché, yes.

[00:29:36]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, is there a similar tradition on girls’ names?

[00:29:40]

**Beba Touloupis:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:29:42]

**Eric Velasco:** Okay. Tell me about that, please.



[00:29:43]

**Beba Touloupis:** So Mary Katherine’s named after her both grandmothers. So she’s got Tasos’ mom, Mary, Maria, and my mom, Katherine. We didn’t know how to not honor both of them, and we were in the South, so we thought, “Okay, two names would work. Mary Katherine will work.” So that’s where she’s at right now. She’s Mary Katherine. So, yeah, it’s a tradition. I mean, it’s longstanding. If you look down any Greek family’s name, you’ll find the grandparents on one side they’ve named after. And today, even today, a lot of the second- and third-generation American families are still doing that. They’re naming it after the grandparents.

[00:30:21]

**Eric Velasco:** And who are you named for?

[00:30:23]

**Beba Touloupis:** I’m named for my paternal grandmother, my dad’s mom, that moved to Nassau. My name is actually Kiriaki, but everybody calls me Beba, sort of a nickname.

[00:30:37]

**Eric Velasco:** How do you get from one to the other?

[00:30:39]

**Beba Touloupis:** Beba is sort of like “baby,” and it stuck. [*Laughs*]

[00:30:45]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Now, that is true, truly a nickname. This is not a short name so it is—

[00:30:50]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yeah, but it’s my name now.

[00:30:51]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Like when the child is baby, you say, “Come here, baby. Come here, baby,” and that “baby” kept on because it became easier to say, “Come here, baby,” because she was truly a baby ever since she was a little one.

[00:31:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Are you the youngest in your family?

[00:31:09]

**Beba Touloupis:** I’m the oldest, actually. [*Laughter*] It’s funny.

[00:31:15]

**Eric Velasco:** Forever young, eh?

[00:31:16]

**Beba Touloupis:** Forever young, absolutely.

[00:31:18]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s why I married her.

[00:31:19]

**Beba Touloupis:** That’s right. *[Laughs]*

[00:31:20]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I saw that.

[00:31:22]

**Eric Velasco:** So talk to me a little bit about what you both did out of college. Let’s start with you, then, because your story kind of catches up at that point.

[00:31:32]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, my story, I discovered in my senior year that I was not going to be involved in the aerospace industry here in the United States because I was not an American citizen at the time, I was a permanent resident, and with the change in Washington from Carter to Reagan, when Reagan took over, because of whatever happened in Iran, he quit giving security clearance to permanent residents, so I was toasted. People were telling me, “Get your papers, become a citizen, and then you can come back and apply,” which I did, but that was seven years after I graduated.

My degree was obsolete in that seven-year span because the technology accelerated so fast, rapidly. I mean when I graduated, our computers were we used to punch cards, and we used

to carry a big box with cards for a five-sentence software. Then after five years, of course, then IBM came out with the first XT computers and so forth, so I was done, history.

Needless to say that I have any regrets why even though I knew that was going to happen, I continued to finish my degree. It was a promise to myself and to my late father that I’m going to go over there and get a degree, and then I violated my other promise, “I’ll come back and live and work in Greece.”

When I got out, I did work at EBSCO Industries, which is a world-known company, a multi-billion-dollar company. They specialized at the time in subscriptions. So I worked in the data processing department since I was aware a little bit about the technology of the times. I lasted two and a half, three years. My personality was not suited to be locked in a cubicle facing a monitor and debugging software in different languages.

So, of course, during the time I was always being involved in the hospitality industry. When I was in Tuscaloosa, I was working at the country club, North River Yacht Club, even though I was not a citizen at the time. Then when I got out, I was working here in Birmingham at various nice restaurants; i.e., Michael’s downtown, used to be very famous restaurant here.

[00:34:43]

**Eric Velasco:** That with Michael Matsos.

[00:34:45]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct, correct. The late Mr. Matsos. He passed away.

[00:34:50]

**Eric Velasco:** I think he was American born of Greek parents.

[00:34:53]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct. Correct. Great tradition, great restaurant, had guests, Bear Bryant. When the football games were taking place, the Iron Bowl was taking place here in Birmingham, I mean, Michael’s was *the* restaurant. That and Bright Star.

[00:35:11]

**Eric Velasco:** Describe it a little bit, please, if you would. Describe Michael’s for us, please.

[00:35:17]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Michael’s was famous at—I remember vividly they were the first ones to introduce the filet mignon that comes from the head of the whole tenderloin, and believe it or not, now the name escapes me, but they were the first ones to offer that as a novelty, and it was most expensive. And, of course, when you go to Michael’s, you’re going to enjoy good food but also spend money because you want to say, “I went to Michael’s.” They were preserving their reputation of good food.

The restaurant was a small maze with multiple rooms, housing about close to three hundred guests, and they were extremely busy. They had multiple bars. The atmosphere was from the old time, the fifties, sixties décor, and the tradition with the host, hostess, multiple management team. And, of course, you know, leave it up to the Greeks, the Greek salad was there, the Greek snapper was there, and the Greek steak was there, but, oh, my gosh, that

particular—the filet mignon was almost like 16 ounces. They were getting two to three, maybe, max, tenderloins out of the—I mean, from the whole tenderloin servings, you know, two, and then the rest of the tenderloin was the regular filet mignon for the lower-class patrons that didn’t want to spend the money.

But it was wonderful. You would see who’s who in Birmingham at the time. There was no other restaurant of the caliber other than those two and also John’s Diner. John’s Diner was downtown. [Interviewer’s note: At the time, John’s was known as John’s Restaurant. Run by Greeks for 60 years, the downtown institution was founded by John Proferis and later purchased by his nephew, Phil Hontzas (who ran Niki’s Downtown with his brothers George and Jimmy Hontzas). The current, non-Greek owners changed the name to John’s City Diner when they took over in 2004.]

So I’m very proud to say, without stepping on anybody’s toes, that the Greeks established the foundation of good restaurants here in Birmingham, and, of course, that shows, having Bright Star receiving the James Beard Award for being an outstanding restaurant for over a century now.

Then we have the newcomers, you know, Frank Stitt and Chris Hastings and George Reis and all these beautiful names, beautiful restaurants, which I think we’re very privileged in Birmingham to have such an eclectic dining atmosphere, I should say, because we really enjoy food. And I’m done quite traveling around the United States, but I would put up the Birmingham restaurants’ and chefs’ honors up against any name. [Interviewer’s note: Frank Stitt is the godfather of fine dining in Birmingham, running Highlands Bar and Grill, Chez Fonfon and Bottega restaurant and café with wife and partner Pardis Stitt. Chef Stitt is a Beard-award winner and Highlands was a Beard finalist for outstanding restaurant nationally for nine

consecutive years through 2017. Chris Hastings, who owns Hot and Hot Fish Club and Ovenbird restaurants with wife and partner Idie Hastings, has the distinction of winning both a James Beard Award (Best Chief South) and televised Iron Chef competition in the same year, 2012. George Reis’ restaurants are Ocean, 26 and the latter’s replacement, Five Point Public House Oyster Bar.]

The other thing is, of course, I got involved in the country club business as I’d left the data processing industry, thank God, and I worked at Riverchase Country Club. At the time, it was *the* neighborhood. Harbert Construction, they owned the country club at the time, and they did a wonderful job to promote the club. Then later in my tenure, they sold the club to the members, and once that took place, the club declined a little bit because of internal politics.

[00:39:10]

**Eric Velasco:** And just for listeners’ purposes, this Riverchase development really is what put the city of Hoover on the map.

[00:39:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct.

[00:39:17]

**Eric Velasco:** Part of that whole thing was the Galleria Mall and residences and all that.

[00:39:21]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct, correct. Harbert was, and still as a company, but the late Harbert, Mr. Jim Harbert, he was a visionary to see what it will take to offer quality of living, and it was the most expensive neighborhood, I should say, at the times, you know, in the early eighties. Then, of course, other developments followed, like Greystone, Liberty Park, etc., etc. So we’re very proud of those too. [Interviewer’s note: Riverchase, Greystone and Liberty Park are suburban neighborhoods known as planned-unit-developments, or PUDs.]

After a number of years working as an assistant club manager at the Riverchase Country Club, I went to Sawgrass Country Club, where the TPC was taking place, and fell in love with the facility. Of course, who in my age, late twenties, you know, just wouldn’t fall in love with it right there by the water? I got a great job at Sawgrass Country Club. I invited my parents, my father and my mother, I rented a house, a big house, and we had a blast. That was the best thing I ever did, other than marry my wife, to have my parents. I was working hard, but they really enjoyed it, just kind of a little escape. So they stayed with me six months. That was the visa. I was making a dollar, and 90 cents was going for the rent, but I didn’t care. I was living the life.

Then after that, I moved back to Birmingham because I used to have a condo, and I rented my condo upon departing to Jacksonville. So I came back because my tenants left. I tended to that business, and I got a job at the Wynfrey Hotel. I was working with the then-owner, Wilson, who established, built the Galleria, Wilson Junior, and—

[00:41:40]

**Eric Velasco:** He’s from Montgomery, right?



[00:41:42]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct,. He is from Montgomery. So quickly, within just a couple of weeks, I climbed the ranks from just being a small assistant manager into a manager, and I was managing the room service, the Ivory Club, and the restaurant, and a lot of hours, a lot of hard work. So I decided to jump, after a little time, to Green Valley Country Club at the time where I worked for nine years, which is a record for a club manager. I was the club manager. And under my tenure at Green Valley Country Club, we did the construction and renamed the country club to Hoover Country Club, and we did the renovation, a multi-million-dollar renovation.

[00:42:41]

**Eric Velasco:** You were the overall club manager there?

[00:42:43]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Mm-hmm, the club manager. I was in charge of the clubhouse, and then I was collaborating with the golf pro and the tennis pro.

[00:42:53]

**Eric Velasco:** We’re going to jump off there, because that comes to a next big moment in this whole story. Let me back up a moment, though. You mentioned working at Michael’s. Were there any other Birmingham restaurants you worked at?

[00:43:07]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I worked at Highlands when Frank Stitt first opened his restaurant. So I worked there for a short period of time while I was working at the EBSCO Industries.

[00:43:22]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you do there?

[00:43:23]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I was an assistant server.

[00:43:25]

**Beba Touloupis:** [*Laughs*] You weren’t even serving?

[00:43:27]

**Tasos Touloupis:** No.

[00:43:28]

**Eric Velasco:** What does an assistant server do?

[00:43:30]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, let me put to you in Greek. I was a busboy. [*Laughter*] That’s what we called assistant servers in Greek. So I’ll teach you Greek during this interview. I was a busboy because I just wanted to work there. It was the—but I knew, I had a feeling that there

was nothing but success for that restaurant. They were serving quality food and something very new. Frank introduced the fine dining, which in Greece I had the pleasure of doing and being a server, but there were no openings for a serving position when I was there, and I didn’t care. I had to work. I just loved to work. I cannot stay. As long as I work and I make some income to supplement other income from the main job, I was happy. I was happy.

I’m going to tell you little story why I had two jobs while I was at EBSCO Industries. When I got the job, I moved to Birmingham and the negotiations were—I was introduced for the first time to a human resources department. In Greece we do not have that; we just have a boss. The boss says, “I’m going to pay you so much money,” and that’s it. So the human resources department told me that my salary, annual salary, was going to be \$17,000, entry salary back in the eighties. I was so excited.

So as the responsible person I was, I said, “Okay, let’s divide \$17,000 by 12, so that’s how much I’m going to make a month.” And then I said, “That’s how much I’m going to pay for rent,” so I chose a nice complex in Hoover to live, and it was expensive. Then I said, “Okay, the apartment’s empty.” Back then, they had furniture stores that you can go and buy the furniture store and make payments, so I went over there and got me a beautiful living room set and dining room and bedroom set, so much. Then I went and got me a used car, so much. And then I was left with about \$150—I remember that vividly—to eat and drink or whatever, you know, personal expenses. I said, “I’ll make it.”

[Interviewer’s note: Mr. Touloupis leaves the booth to answer a telephone call.]

[00:46:08]

**Eric Velasco:** While you pause on that, we’ll talk about your journey coming out of UAB.

[00:46:12]

**Beba Touloupis:** So I graduate UAB and I did like the five-year plan. I was dating Tasos, I lost my dad, I went back home for a couple months, came back. In the meantime, Tasos and I had been dating and getting serious, so I graduated after we got married, actually. So at that point, it was ’95, I finished UAB, and I had a psychology degree and I didn’t know what I was going to do.

So my first job was more social work. I end up working with Birmingham Healthcare for the Homeless as a social worker, so I worked there for two years, and it was some of the hardest work I’d ever done, dealing with the homeless population, and really eye-opening to see the need in the community. I used to work in the old church building where Jones Valley Farm is. That wasn’t there in 1995. *[Laughs]* It wasn’t a cool neighborhood in ’95. It was a scary neighborhood in 1995. *[Interviewer’s note: Now known as Jones Valley Teaching Farm, the urban farm was founded in 2001 in an impoverished downtown Birmingham neighborhood dominated by a public-housing complex that later was redeveloped into mixed-income housing.]*

So it was a really great experience. It was tough, it was emotional, and I knew that that was not going to be something I could do forever, and it wasn’t enough money. I mean, it was just nothing.

So Tasos was working at Hoover and we were married, so I thought, “I’m going to go get my master’s.” So I enrolled in the master’s program at UAB for counseling. So I worked on that for about a year, and then I managed to get pregnant with John and put that on the back

burner. So that leads us up to 2000, literally. I mean, so after I had John, I was not working.

Tasos was at Hoover Country Club, and I was trying to decide what we’re going to do. And that leads us to 2000, May 2000, and Mr. Ted coming into our lives.

[00:48:07]

**Eric Velasco:** So tell us about that. Mr. Ted, we’re talking about Ted Sarris.

[00:48:12]

**Beba Touloupis:** Ted Sarris.

[00:48:13]

**Eric Velasco:** Ted’s Old Hickory.

[00:48:14]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes, absolutely. Tasos should tell—

[Interviewer’s note: Mr. Touloupis returns to the booth after the phone conversation.]

[00:48:17]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Let me finish my story.

[00:48:18]

**Eric Velasco:** I’m sorry. Yes.

[00:48:20]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Let me finish my story when I was introduced to a real salary, my first job in the United States. So when I calculated everything, I allowed myself to have a couple hundred dollars’ spending money from the—it was about 1,400, 1,500 dollars I was going to have income. So I said, “Perfect. Thirteen hundred goes to bills and 200 I’m going to live.”

When I received my first paycheck, nobody told me that it was a lot less when they told me. So I went straight to the Human Resources, I said, “There is a mistake on my check.” I remember that like it happened this morning. So everybody look at me like I was from Mars, and they started laughing. I said, “They told me 17, so if I divide this, I’m going to be making 1,450, but my check is only 11-so-and-so.”

They said to me—they introduced me to a great agency called IRS, and they said, “You have to pay taxes in the United States.

But I said, “We don’t do in Greece.” Of course, that’s why we’re bankrupt today. But I was appalled. I said, “Okay.” I didn’t say anything else. It is what it is, so I was \$300 in the hole the first month. I said, “I’d better find me a job, because they’re going to come and take my furniture, my car.” And that’s how I started working a second job, very hard. I didn’t care what it was, because I made a mistake in calculating and ignoring my brother IRS.

I think you know that was a good story, in a sense, that when you’re immigrant and you don’t introduce to all the little details, it’s very difficult as you stumble upon every detail and adjust yourself to the American way instead of trying to change the system, because you just find out yourself. Nobody was there to guide me to say, “No, Tasos, that’s not accurate.” I did everything by myself because I didn’t have relatives, I didn’t have anybody to say, “Hey, buddy, you’re making a mistake here. Be careful.”

[00:50:44]

**Eric Velasco:** And that’s a different thing from what many of the other Greeks here in Birmingham experienced, because it seemed like 90 percent of them are related to somebody who they came and worked for and lived with and all that.

[00:50:59]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct, correct. I had an uncle. So, like example, Mr. Ted, you know, came because his uncle was here and had a restaurant, so he worked for his uncle. [Interviewer’s note: Ted Sarris came from Tsitalia, Greece, to Birmingham in 1955 to work at a restaurant owned by his immigrant uncle, Jim Sarris. In 1960, Ted bought Old Hickory Restaurant from his uncle, who returned to live in Greece.]

So when you have a figure of a father, uncle, cousin, they will guide you a little bit. They will tell you this is what you need to do instead of just my theory was trial and error. So I tried [Laughs], I made a mistake, moved on so to this day, I guess.

[00:51:35]

**Eric Velasco:** When did you start to work for Highlands?

[00:51:36]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Probably was about ’88, ’89.

[00:51:49]

**Eric Velasco:** So this place had a pretty solid reputation at the time. How did you wind up getting a job?

[00:51:53]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Oh, persistent. I said, “I just want to be a busboy,” you know. And Frank was so busy trying to build his business or whatever, and said, “Okay. All right. Give him a couple of shifts.”

[00:52:07]

**Beba Touloupis:** I think it might have been earlier than that, actually. Might have been earlier than that.

[00:52:12]

**Tasos Touloupis:** It might be. I don’t remember my years, you know.

[00:52:13]

**Beba Touloupis:** It was earlier than that. It was earlier.

[00:52:14]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I graduated in ’83. Maybe, you know, between ’83 and ’87, those years. It was very interesting.



[00:52:25]

**Eric Velasco:** So now we fast-forward to May of 2000. You’re working at the country club and Mr. Ted is planning his, what, seventieth birthday, was it?

[00:52:35]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I’m working as a club manager, and Beba gave me several times an ultimatum because I was playing a little golf, and when she was calling, I was saying, “I have a meeting with my Finance Committee,” and then she was calling the next day, and I had a meeting with the House Committee and with the Tennis Committee. There were so many committees in the country club, but there were so many opportunities to play golf. And Beba said, “We cannot raise the family if you just work so much.”

[00:53:12]

**Eric Velasco:** You were a golf widow.

[00:53:13]

**Beba Touloupis:** I would say so. Country club widow, yes. It was tough because we had two kids. The boys are seventeen months apart, yeah, so by 2000 we had—Alexi was six months and John was two. It was tough.

[00:53:30]

**Eric Velasco:** You’re going it alone because, again, you don’t have that family support system.

[00:53:33]

**Beba Touloupis:** Nobody was here. Nobody. No aunts, nobody. It was just me and Tasos.

[00:53:37]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The issue in the country club life is that you can have a great check, I should say, but when everybody has a holiday, you don’t. You work. When everybody goes to church, you don’t on a Sunday. You have to have Sunday brunch. So it was becoming a little more difficult, so I was becoming a little more desperate to decide how am I going to do from here on because the family has increased.

All of a sudden, I get a phone call from Mr. Ted. Mr. Ted wanted to have a party for his seventieth birthday. So being a nice Greek fellow, I said, “Why don’t you bring your wife and come for dinner at the club. I’ll buy you dinner and we’ll talk about the party.”

[00:54:28]

**Eric Velasco:** For the purposes of the recording, who is Mr. Ted?

[00:54:30]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Mr. Ted is the landlord of—

[00:54:33]

**Beba Touloupis:** Ted Sarris.

[00:54:34]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Ted Sarris. Mr. Ted Sarris is the landlord of the building, the property, and he is the one who established Ted as a restaurant. [Interviewer’s note: Ted Sarris lost the lease on the original Old Hickory restaurant in 1972 and built the current location. Upon moving there in 1973, he renamed the restaurant Ted’s Old Hickory.]

So I always in my tenure as a club manager invited the people, because you make them feel welcome, you make them feel comfortable. A dinner or a glass of wine is not going to be an extreme cost when you’re looking at a wedding reception or a party. It’s just part of doing good business.

Anyway, Mr. Ted said, “I’ve heard a lot of good things about you. You’re doing a great job at the club.”

And I said, “Yes, I thank you, I appreciate it, but I’m looking for something else to do.”

He said, “Why don’t you come and buy my restaurant? I’m selling it.”

I laughed at him, not at his face, but I kind of smiled and said, “Well, I don’t have a lot of money, you know, but I will be there with my wife.” The dinner was Friday. I said, “I’ll be there Monday and just check it out.” So we had a great dinner and we discussed about the party, his party and everything.

So I come over here with my wife Monday, and I fell in love immediately with the atmosphere. Of course, we changed the décor, but the atmosphere being that small dining, and you can monitor everything that is going on without having people to disappear, and it is just a very well-oiled machine. And he did it. In his infinite wisdom, Mr. Ted went to school till third grade, so the education he has is a third-grader, but he succeeded in building a small empire here,

because he graduated from the university of life. Very, very few people do that nowadays, and kudos to him, with all due respect.

I said, “Mr. Ted, I’d love to buy your restaurant, you know, but I don’t have too much money.”

Of course, truly—and I say that, you know, and almost getting emotional—the line goes, “I’ll make you a deal you can’t refuse,” and he did that. And I didn’t refuse. I took the deal, and to this day I’m thankful, because my wife and I raised our family. And we kept Mr. Ted for three months to teach us his ways, and it was a love-hate relationship every day because I’m from a country club environment to the grinding environment of don’t give any orders; you do it yourself. Don’t tell anybody; you do it yourself. *[Laughs]*

[00:57:39]

**Beba Touloupis:** Mr. Ted was hands-on. He cut every piece of meat, every vegetable. He did it. Eighty percent of the work Mr. Ted did. It was incredible, incredible.

[00:57:50]

**Eric Velasco:** And how big a staff did you have at the country club?

[00:57:53]

**Tasos Touloupis:** At the country club I had about fifty people.

[00:57:57]

**Eric Velasco:** And here?

[00:57:58]

**Tasos Touloupis:** And here I had, when I started, eight people. Eight people.

So he said, “You put your wife to take the money,” and he introduced us to a cash register that was manufactured in 1932, and I still have it as a souvenir, antique. “And you be the first one to serve the customers with a smile, and you will make money.”

And I said after a while, “Okay.” We had to change the register because Beba was not able to use her fingers, you know, to punch the little things. It was so funny, hilarious. I mean, that register was working perfectly for all those years.

[00:58:44]

**Eric Velasco:** But it’s harder than mashing the keys on a manual typewriter.

[00:58:48]

**Beba Touloupis:** Oh, yes, absolutely.

[00:58:51]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Oh, my goodness, yes, yes. And then the tape and everything.

So Mr. Ted was a great benefactor for my financial independence. So he helped tremendously and since 2000—what is it now, seventeen years—we just recently renewed the lease. We have another nine years, eight years, and another option. So we’re going to be here till all the kids are out of college. [Interviewer’s note: Bringing the evolution of the restaurant’s name to date, Mr. and Mrs. Touloupis shortened it to Ted’s after they took over in 2000.]

[00:59:28]

**Eric Velasco:** And then what are your thoughts?

[00:59:30]

**Tasos Touloupis:** My thoughts, our thoughts, are just to finish with education for all the kids and maintain the restaurant, and then after we do that, we’re going to work a little bit, you know, to think about our retirement, because we emphasize on the kids’ education, and they are everything for us right now. So we’ve just done very little about our own retirement. And being also an independent business owner, it’s very hard to be disciplined and say, okay, I’m going to put so much for create your own 401(k) or create your own investment or whatever, you know. So we’ve done a little bit, but after that, that’s what we’re going to do.

[01:00:24]

**Eric Velasco:** Then your youngest, I believe, is in eighth grade, you said?

[01:00:26]

**Tasos Touloupis:** She is fourteen. She’s about to be fifteen. So I’ve got a good ten years, which is perfect. I might work another ten years. But I’m still young. I’ll be sixty in a couple of weeks, on February the 12<sup>th</sup>, so they say that today’s sixty is the old forties. So you know what? I’ve got plenty of time.

[01:00:54]

**Eric Velasco:** I would not have guessed sixty, looking at you.

[01:00:57]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, thank you. You’re very kind. She takes good care of me.

[01:01:01]

**Eric Velasco:** The work, I would imagine, the physical labor and all that, probably plays a role as well.

[01:01:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I witnessed quickly that Mr. Ted was doing a lot of physical work, and I tried to exercise my aerospace engineering, you know, and put it in good use. I tried to work smart by surrounding myself with some good people. My people, my kitchen manager has been with me since 2001, that’s fifteen years, and my other cooks are double-digits and my wait staff are double-digits tenure here. The atmosphere I always wanted to create was the country club style of having fun, entertaining, getting to know your customers. It’s not just, “Give me your money. Thank you. Goodbye.” We know a lot of my customers’ first names, what they drink, where they sit. Everybody has their favorites. And the majority of my customers are patronizing the restaurant two and a half, three times a week, which is great.

The surrounding area is booming. Kudos to the local government. I mean, the mayor’s doing a great job, in my opinion, just promoting the Birmingham area and revitalizing the buildings downtown. But there is going to be a lot of competition in 2017 with all the development. I forget the number. I think in 2017 in this immediate area, you know, in downtown there will be thirty-six new restaurants, and the pie container is not getting any bigger,

you know, to bake a big pie so everybody can have a share. So you have to be on top of your game.

[01:03:19]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you have any Greeks working here?

[01:03:22]

**Tasos Touloupis:** No, I don’t have any Greeks, even though in the past, Mr. Ted had a Greek, his nephew was working here, and his nephew wanted to buy the restaurant, and Mr. Ted was going to sell the restaurant to his nephew. And thank God, the nephew got married to a Greek girl from Greece, and she said, “No, we’re going back to Greece.” And here comes Tasos. Now, how coincidental is that, that the lady said no, forcing—of course, you know the woman controls everything, and they went to Greece, and, therefore, Mr. Ted didn’t have any buyers. And what he wanted was to find a Greek who will appreciate his recipes, who will continue the tradition, and he fell in love with me and my attitude of “I’m not going to change anything. I want *exactly* the same recipes.” I might bring a little different technique, but I want the same recipes.” And we enhanced the menu by adding a couple of vegetables this way, that way, and the other way, and we increased the number of vegetables and the variety of meats selection and so forth. And, of course, we slowly introduced Ted’s Restaurant to the twenty-first century and start taking credit cards. Mr. Ted never took credit cards.

[01:05:00]

**Eric Velasco:** When did you start?



[01:05:02]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I started a few years after I bought it. I don’t remember exactly.

[01:05:07]

**Eric Velasco:** It was at least three or four years, at least three or four years afterwards.

[01:05:10]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Like 2005, maybe. And then, of course, we developed a little bit of a website and we developed a—Beba is in charge of the technology because she works most of the times at the home, at the house, and she handles all the accounting, all the invoicing, all the payroll, and all the communication, advertising, and everything. And I’m just doing all the logistics. So it’s a perfect professional marriage, and a lot of people are jealous because we’re still working and living in the same room together. *[Laughs]* A lot of people usually have a little collision when the business affects their personal life, but we haven’t done that, and I don’t think we will ever do. I mean, it’s a perfect match. I worry about all the details. She lets me handle all the details and she handles the big stuff.

[01:06:31]

**Eric Velasco:** Let’s back up a little bit. When Mr. Ted came up with that idea, what were your thoughts on the matter?

[01:06:38]

**Beba Touloupis:** I was scared, shocked. I’m like, “We don’t know anything about—.” *I* didn’t know anything about the restaurant business. But I tell you, I will never forget that first visit when we came when Mr. Ted said, “Please come to the restaurant.” We were sitting at that table right over there. Alexi was in a pumpkin seat, those baby seats, and I remember just—and I had never been here before. I had been at UAB, never been here, didn’t know Ted’s Restaurant existed.

[01:07:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Just for people’s understanding, we’re pretty close to UAB, aren’t we?

[01:07:12]

**Beba Touloupis:** Very close to UAB. I’d go around the corner, literally two blocks away. So I had no idea what a “meat and three” was after all this time. I’d been in Birmingham now eleven years, didn’t know what “meat and three” was, didn’t know the concept, didn’t know the food, had no idea. So I came and I was fascinated. I’m like, “Oh, my goodness. This is amazing. This place is so cool and the food’s so good.” So when we went back home and talked about it, I’m like, “Do you think we can do this?”

And Tasos was like, “Yeah, I think we can do this.”

And I can tell you, honestly, it was blind faith and trust in the fact that Mr. Ted has this figured out, that it was almost kind of naïve, because I knew he could do it, but it was like we just took on this task and I don’t think we realized the magnitude and what we were taking on. I don’t think we realized it for a few years, the fact that we had taken an established restaurant

with such a history and such a background, and we were responsible for it. It was a challenge, and I quickly realized that I had no idea what was going on. Like I went back in the kitchen and they were showing me, for example, what do we put in the cornbread? Crackling, crackling. Went back in the kitchen, they were making crackling. Do you know what crackling is?

[01:08:36]

**Eric Velasco:** I do.

[01:08:36]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes. Crackling is fat, pork fat. So they were back there working it, and I said to one lady, I was like, “What is this? What are you doing here?”

And they were like, “This is crackling, Miss Beba.”

I’m like, “What do you do with crackling?”

They’re like, “Well, we make cornbread.”

I’m like, “Really?”

[01:08:56]

**Eric Velasco:** You put it in the cornbread.

[01:08:57]

**Beba Touloupis:** They’re like, “Yes.” So they brought me the cornbread afterwards to try, and I was like, “Oh, my goodness. It tastes pretty good,” but I should not know what crackling is, but I do now. I didn’t know what collard greens were, didn’t eat collard greens, so didn’t—

[01:09:12]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you cook at home?

[01:09:13]

**Beba Touloupis:** I grew up with the Greek food. My mom was a really good Greek cook, so I was Greek American, you know. But I don’t know how I missed the “meat and three” concept. It really blows my mind that I did.

[01:09:25]

**Eric Velasco:** Give me some for instances on what you would cook at home.

[01:09:28]

**Beba Touloupis:** Greek food? Greek chicken, meat, a lot of meat, a lot of potatoes. We did salads. We did—

[01:09:35]

**Tasos Touloupis:** She did a lot of casseroles, in other words. Instead of new potatoes, we do casserole and potatoes and meat, which is a warm dish—

[01:09:47]

**Beba Touloupis:** A lot of soups.

[01:09:49]

**Tasos Touloupis:** —and with a little tomato sauce, light. Then a lot of orzo pasta dishes, and often pasta with meat, or chicken with orzo pasta. Orzo pasta is very popular in Greece.

We love to do grilled fish and also Fish en Papillote, wrapped in wax paper with fresh vegetables and bake it, things like that. The Pastitsio, the Moussaka, all those things that you really, honest to God, you slave yourself in the kitchen for two hours, three hours for one particular dish. It’s not just something, you know, that a busy mother or a father, for that very same reason, can throw in and do a little maybe chicken stir fry with some vegetables and in twenty minutes you have dinner. I mean, those are labor-intense recipes, and that’s the problem sometimes with the Greek cuisine. Everybody says, “I love Greek cuisine,” and that’s why they do, because everything is from scratch. The tomato, the meat sauce, is going to be from scratch, and she’s going to peel the garlic, she’s going to do everything from scratch, to make a tomato sauce, simple tomato sauce, or meat sauce for the spaghetti. So we got used to that, but here we got introduced to the Souvlaki.

[01:11:26]

**Beba Touloupis:** Southern cuisine.

[01:11:27]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The Souvlaki was incredible because he maintained that reputation, a tribute to Greece, he called it. It’s the Greek barbecue. It’s a Boston butt, we trim it, we cut it in cubes, marinate in olive oil and seasoning overnight, and then put it on a skewer and grill it. It’s

fantastic, it’s very clean, and the sauce is just simple lemon butter sauce, healthy, in a way, of course, the butter.

But while I was being taught on the steam table the very first three months, I used to get confused between the collard greens and the turnip greens, and we never—we eat greens as a salad but not as a hot vegetable. So we’d take the—

[01:12:19]

**Beba Touloupis:** On-the-job training. [*Laughs*]

[01:12:19]

**Tasos Touloupis:** We’d take the greens and we’d boil them, and we use olive oil and lemon, and that is a salad, a type of a salad, next to the Greek salad, the traditional peasant Greek salad, next to the beet salad. Now it’s very trendy. I grew up having beet salad. Recently we had it, you know, at my friend George Reis at the Ocean, great beet salad, outstanding, and I said, “Beba, I remember forty years ago we used to eat that with a fried cod and garlic dip.” The combination of the fried fish, the beet salad, and the garlic dip, it’s outstanding, but then you should never kiss anybody.

[01:13:12]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you think the first time you saw beets in a can here?

[01:13:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Oh, it was not good. I mean, we used to get the beets from the market, you know, and just boil them, you know, and put a little seasoning and so forth or whatever. As a matter of fact, the traditional way to dye eggs for the Easter is to take the beets juice or the onions. We used very rarely dye, commercial dye powder, to dye our eggs. You know what I do is I save all the skin, the outside of the onion, and we boil that. That produces the best red paint.

[01:14:02]

**Eric Velasco:** So it’s the purple onion, then?

[01:14:04]

**Beba Touloupis:** No, just the brown onions.

[01:14:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Brown onions?

[01:14:05]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes.

[01:14:04]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Not the red. And some vinegar. Trust me, I mean, it produces the best. All the kids, they were so excited. “Mommy, the color is beautiful,” beautiful deep red crimson like a red wine color, and very natural, no preservatives, no artificial flavoring, or nothing, whatever.

[01:14:33]

**Eric Velasco:** It won’t give you cancer.

[01:14:34]

**Beba Touloupis:** That’s right.

[01:14:34]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Exactly. And also the beets. You boil the beets and you take the juice, which is so red. If you stain your clothes, you’re done. [*Laughs*] But it was a nice experience.

Mr. Ted was—I’ll tell you how nice he was. The first day we took over, it May the 15<sup>th</sup> of 2000. He says, “I’ll show up early in the morning.” And he tells me, “This is the register. It has \$200 cash. That’s mine. At the end of the day, I’ll take the 200. The rest is yours.” That’s how nice he was. So I started the business. We didn’t buy a business to this day; we bought a clientele, if that makes any sense.

[01:15:30]

**Eric Velasco:** Explain.

[01:15:32]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The business was already here, very well established. All we had to do is continue the success—



[01:15:40]

**Beba Touloupis:** The tradition.

[01:15:41]

**Tasos Touloupis:** —that Mr. Ted had by maintaining the recipes and better the recipes by introducing new recipes but not screwing around, you know, trying to make more money by cutting, “No, that’s too expensive,” or that’s not this, that, that, and the other.

He used to have farmers coming in every day back then to deliver the goods, because his kitchen was so small. I expanded it, because this was driving me crazy every day. He used to have one stove, and he used to have his routine that at eight o’clock we’re going to bake the chicken, then at eight-thirty we’re going to do the roast beef, and then at nine o’clock—I mean, it was a routine. It was an assembly line at its finest, and I was more of an organizer, “We need to have two ovens and two of these or whatever, to just expedite, in case something goes down or something.” Anyways, different mentality, you know.

So he set me up and he gave me all the tools necessary to continue the success. I did not have to, say, like advertise or go out in the street with a sign and say, “Hey,” or put a banner outside of Ted’s Restaurant say “Now Open Under New Management,” and all these nice things.

[01:17:19]

**Beba Touloupis:** We didn’t miss a beat.

[01:17:20]

**Tasos Touloupis:** All of a sudden, all of a sudden, you know, all the customers, for three months they were coming and they were seeing a new face next to Mr. Ted, and Mr. Ted was saying, “Say hello to the new owner. If he screws up, you call me.” Just his words, “If he screws up my recipes, you call me.” [*Laughs*]

And during the months and years, of course, nobody’s perfect. He would run to somebody, you know, just would tell him, maybe to make him feel good, say, “Mr. Ted, we miss you, you know. The food is not as good as you used to.”

The phone would ring, “Hey, what did you do with my Pastitsio or my Souvlaki? I ran into somebody and told me they didn’t enjoy it. Did you leave too much fat in it? Did you do—?” [*Laughs*] So he would just let me have it, which is it funny now, but it was really annoying at the time, but, hey, all is in good jest because that was his baby.

[01:18:30]

**Eric Velasco:** And that must be part of the intimidation part you were talking about. Like you said, you inherit history and a clientele and yet—

[01:18:37]

**Beba Touloupis:** It was. It was huge, and it took—to be honest, they probably for the first year challenged each other the most. I mean, Mr. Ted was so to the “T” of how he wanted everything done, and I’m so thankful now that he was like that, because we literally did not miss a beat. I don’t think the customers—I mean, really, it was such a smooth transaction. Miss Litsa was

here, and she helped me with the register, she helped me figure out the people, and we quickly realized how fortunate we were. [Interviewer’s note: Miss Litsa is Mr. Ted’s wife, Litsa Sarris.]

But if it wasn’t for him, I don’t think if he had stayed with us, it would have been a lot harder and a lot more challenging to have figured out so quickly what was right and what worked and not to mess with it too terribly. We tweaked a few recipes, like Tasos said, and maybe brought them to the twenty-first century a little bit, maybe not so heavy, but we just continued what he started, and I think we’ve done him proud now. It’s taken us seventeen years, and I think he can look at us now and very proudly say, you know, “You’re doing a good job.” But it was intimidating, absolutely. And, you know, the first thing we did was when Tasos came in, he wanted to paint it, because it was brown paneling, dark brown paneling, and it was really depressing 1970s.

[01:19:54]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Like in the seventies. I’m talking about the—

[01:19:59]

**Beba Touloupis:** Brown.

[01:20:00]

**Tasos Touloupis:** —brown, dark brown like the booth color, and it was so dark.

[01:20:05]

**Beba Touloupis:** We painted that summer. Immediately we painted.

[01:20:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** And when I painted that paneling white as a primer during the one weekend, and then we were going to come the next weekend and paint the two coats of color, the customers walked in here and it was like—honest to God, it was like they were all of a sudden somewhere in Florida, you know, and the sun was against their eyes. They were saying, “Tasos, what did you do? You blinded us.” It was such a dramatic change.

[01:20:41]

**Beba Touloupis:** It was scary, though. I got nervous. Will they—

[*Interruption*]

[01:20:46]

**Eric Velasco:** Here we go. Okay. We’re resuming the interview transcript here. The battery just died on us, but we have picked back up here.

Tasos, we were talking a little bit about Mr. Ted and the feedback that he would get from some of the customers. When you changed the colors on the walls, how quickly did your phone ring afterward?

[01:21:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** [*Laughter*] Immediately, but it was a pleasant surprise. And then three, four, five years later, I decided to change the whole interior and came up with the idea, “Okay, I don’t want to lose any business. Can I do this during the weekend?” Have a very, very good friend of

mine, he’s extremely capable to make anything extraordinary beautiful out of wood, and he did our kitchen cabinets. His name is Wayne Faulkner [phonetic]. I talked to him and I said, “Wayne, what we need to do is cover that ugly paneling, because if I take it out, God knows what I’m going to discover behind, because this is an old building. I mean, it’s over forty years old.”

And he goes, “All right, what do you have in mind?”

I said, “What I want to do is come and put a whole new front wall on the existing paneling and nail it.” And we came with this idea that every section that you see here is in pieces, you know, and that kind of gave a little more Greek architectural interior design. Then, of course, the frames, the existing frames, they are since 1970s. Mr. Ted bought them from a starving artist from New York. And what I did was enhance the framework, spent a lot of money for the frames because of the size. The particular picture of New York is accurate now because it was painted before the erection of the Twin Towers, so the Twin Towers are no longer there. But that picture was painted before they erected the Twin Towers.

[01:23:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you know when it was painted?

[01:23:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Yes, it was painted back in the fifties, fifties, sixties.

[01:23:14]

**Eric Velasco:** Why New York?

[01:23:14]

**Tasos Touloupis:** He liked that piece to go and cover the whole wall behind the steam table, so I think he liked the size of it, and also New York is New York, I guess. He picked up a theme from a lot of different places, and the only one he mastered was the Acropolis. And then I brought in a couple of pieces of mine. [Interviewer’s note: Mr. Touloupis begins pointing out different pieces of framed art on the restaurant walls.]

My favorite one is my hometown landmark, which is the white tower. That poster over there is the first original poster of the modern Olympics in 1896 in Athens. So that was the official poster, and I’m very fond of my culture and my history, so I said, “I need to have that.”

The one you’re looking here was given to us because we fed 150 soldiers going to Afghanistan and their families, and they asked us to feed them. We did it gratis because we felt like, and we became very good friends. So when the group came back all safe, they had a celebration, and they awarded us with this picture that is made out of thousands of pictures live of soldiers, and you can see the American flag waving, you know. I said, “That will go to the restaurant. I know the right spot.” So I’m very proud of that award.

And, of course, over the years I’ve built this wall over here made out of cork, against my wife’s best wishes, because I wanted to create a little family kind of—we have our pictures over there, and we dedicated a little area over the saints of our Greek Orthodoxy. And there you have it. We continue.

[01:25:34]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me a little bit about the history of Ted’s and even going back to the Old Hickory Restaurant.

[01:25:41]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Mr. Ted came here and worked for his uncle, who owned John’s Diner, and then he saved some money.

[01:25:53]

**Eric Velasco:** John Proferis was his uncle?

[01:25:56]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Yes. Then he—if I’m correct—

[01:26:01]

**Beba Touloupis:** I don’t think so.

[01:26:02]

**Tasos Touloupis:** No?

[01:26:03]

**Beba Touloupis:** His uncle owned Ted’s Old Hickory. Didn’t he started Ted’s Old Hickory over here on South Side?

[01:26:09]

**Tasos Touloupis:** But he also worked at John’s City Diner, but he did work for his uncle too. I think he started Ted’s Old Hickory at South Side, and then he came over here. [Interviewer’s

note: John Proferis, a Greek immigrant, started John’s Restaurant in 1944. He is related to the Sarris family, which is from Tsitalia, Greece.]

[01:26:20]

**Eric Velasco:** Right.

[01:26:21]

**Tasos Touloupis:** He saw an opportunity and he bought this piece of property and built. And when he was building the building, at the foundation he found a horseshoe, and that horseshoe to this day is on top of the door.

Now, we got into the biggest fight, argument, because some customers told me, “Tasos, you got the horseshoe upside down. You need to turn it the other way.”

And I said, “Okay, I will.” So I did it, just so I don’t have this every day, you know, “What’s wrong with you? It’s upside down.”

[01:27:04]

**Eric Velasco:** And what’s the significance of that?

[01:27:05]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The significance of that, you know, in the Greek culture, according to Mr. Ted, who is the expert, the horseshoe has to be opened downwards so all the luck stays in the spot.



[01:27:18]

**Eric Velasco:** So it’s the opposite of the American tradition?

[01:27:21]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct. Now, who is right and who is wrong—

[01:27:24]

**Eric Velasco:** Mr. Ted. [*Laughter*]

[01:27:26]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Given the fact that Greece has a couple of more years of history and horses—

[*Laughter*]

[01:27:34]

**Beba Touloupis:** We’ll go with Mr. Ted.

[01:27:35]

**Tasos Touloupis:** —I’ll tend to go with the experience. Like a Super Bowl game, you know, you go with the experienced team than the new team.

Anyways, so I said, “Mr. Ted, I’ll make you happy.”

He goes, “How’s your business?”

I said, “Okay. Could be better.”

“It’s the horseshoe. You need to turn it upside down. Do it. You want me to do it?” He was ready to climb up the steps, you know, and turn it upside down.

[01:27:59]

**Eric Velasco:** And he’s into his seventies at this point, right?

[01:28:02]

**Beba Touloupis:** Oh, yes, yes. Yes.

[01:28:03]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Eighties, good eighties, I mean, you know. [Interviewer’s note: Mr. Sarris was born in 1930.]

[01:28:03]

**Beba Touloupis:** He had a great vision to think to buy this property here on the edge of UAB and downtown back in 1972 to build this little restaurant here. It’s really amazing, if you think about it, that he took that chance. And he built it and he had a budget, and within budget and within time.

[01:28:24]

**Tasos Touloupis:** He worked hard in his life.

[01:28:26]

**Beba Touloupis:** He sure did.

[01:28:28]

**Tasos Touloupis:** And that—I don’t want to be politically incorrect, but anybody who comes in this country, you know, and has one vision, to work hard, to raise the family, and make money, I guarantee you he will do that. And Mr. Ted did it all by himself with limited education, like I told you. He had a great common sense, and he didn’t trust people in a sense that he wanted guarantees, but, boy, if you tell him that you’re going to do this on that day and you didn’t do it, it was the end of the world. And I don’t blame him. That’s how he was when he was promising somebody that “I’m going to do it,” and he was doing it.

The envelope did not stay closed off a certain bill when the mailman was bringing it more than five minutes. He opened it, write a check, mailed the check, I mean immediately, and that’s how he was. I was doing it once a month like every good American, all payables, you know, by the tenth of the month. [*Laughs*] “No. You get the bill, you pay the bill immediately. That’s how you’re going to make money.” Which in theory, you know, is crazy, but in reality, he was 100 percent right.

[01:30:01]

**Eric Velasco:** Were these things he learned from working for his uncle before he bought out and started Ted’s Old Hickory?

[01:30:08]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Mr. Ted worked hard, and he also worked in the shipping industry. He was a cook in a boat, and that really made him to work hard, because back then, to be a cook in a kitchen in a boat and feed the crew was hard work. You don’t have amenities. You have to be inventive. You have to manufacture everything. You have to just do everything from scratch. So he learned hard work early on.

[01:30:44]

**Beba Touloupis:** He also came from the generation that survived World War II and they had nothing, so it was very important for him to never be like that again. So I think he worked really hard, that he was really, I want to say, almost frugal. I mean, he really was very careful with everything he did, and very thoughtful, and he has this to show for it now, you know. He passed that on to us. But, yeah, that generation, they were not wasteful. They were not wasteful. You want to tell him about the garbage bags?

[01:31:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, Mr. Ted had one sixty-gallon garbage container. One.

[01:31:25]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yeah, one.

[01:31:26]

**Tasos Touloupis:** In the center.

[01:31:28]

**Eric Velasco:** For the restaurant.

[01:31:28]

**Tasos Touloupis:** For the restaurant, yeah. And he never—I mean, I don’t want anybody to take it wrong, you know, but when he was ordering chicken, the chicken was coming in a garbage bag. He washed the garbage bag, put it in the garbage container, and he used the garbage bag.

[01:31:47]

**Beba Touloupis:** For the garbage.

[01:31:48]

**Tasos Touloupis:** He made his own soap from the fat, instead of wasting the fat. Nowadays, we have companies that they come and pick up the grease. He didn’t have that. He was making his own soap.

[01:32:02]

**Eric Velasco:** And the soap would be for use here at the restaurant?

[01:32:05]

**Tasos Touloupis:** To clean the floors, to clean the kitchen, to clean everything, yes. He was buying soap, you know.

[01:32:10]

**Eric Velasco:** Chris Hastings explored doing something like that over at OvenBird when he was opening up that new place. It was kind of a boutique thing now.

[01:32:17]

**Beba Touloupis:** Interesting, so you see—yeah.

[01:32:18]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct. He was doing it out of necessity and frugality. He said, “No, I don’t—.” When I walked in here, there was only one broom, one mop. I mean, that’s it. And a bucket from the 1940s. But he didn’t—“If it works, I’m not going to spend money to upgrade.” That’s the mentality, which—

[01:32:46]

**Beba Touloupis:** That generation.

[01:32:47]

**Tasos Touloupis:** —I mean, it’s great, you know, but you want to enjoy the work by having the tools.

[*Telephone interruption*]

[01:33:18]

**Eric Velasco:** So he had a sense of frugality, reuse, repurpose.

[01:33:23]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Yes, yes, reuse.

[01:33:23]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes.

[01:33:24]

**Eric Velasco:** Throw away nothing.

[01:33:25]

**Beba Touloupis:** Recycle. It was before it was cool.

[01:33:27]

**Tasos Touloupis:** He had a two-door freezer, a two-door freezer, and he was receiving the goods every day, and some of them, they were frozen, of course. And a two-door cooler and that was it, every day. Every day the truck will come and deliver four gallons of milk, one case of cheese, one of this, one of this, one of this, and he takes all the ingredients, I should say, the raw material, cook it for the day and then the coolers and the freezer was empty. Start all over again the next day.

Immediately, as soon as I came, I expanded, knocked a hole in the wall, put a door and put a storage room, country club style. He was making fun of me. And a freezer and a cooler, walk-in, so I have the ability to work. I mean, I’m not going to order a truck and unload the truck every day, even though that was only five, six boxes, cases, whatever.

In any rate, it was a different mentality of doing business, but all is good and he was very, very successful. He can be an inspiration. I wish he can write a book about it, “How I made it with two years of elementary education.” I mean, that would be a great example, you know, to the mentality of our young population, that are just dedicated on the Internet instead of just hard work and do it yourself. Anyways.

[01:35:16]

**Eric Velasco:** It sounded like he’s quite a character. Tell me a little about his personality.

[01:35:21]

**Tasos Touloupis:** His personality is to constantly giving advice, no matter what the circumstances are, according to his experience, and that’s part of the old tradition. That’s part of growing up in a horrible time of World War the Second and starvation.

[01:35:48]

**Eric Velasco:** And occupation.



[01:35:49]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Occupation, fighting, you know, for a piece of bread, and something that people might see it in a movie or read it, but they don’t even have a hundredth of a sense to realize what it was. I mean, he lived it, and that carries a lot of weight in every decision that he made, that he didn’t believe on waste.

Perfect example. The very first day that I started working at the steam table, I made me a plate to eat, and, of course, the eyes were bigger than the tummy. I tried, ate a little bit of everything. I didn’t finish my plate. I never got cussed out, you know, so much. I remember when I was a little kid, and my father used to say, “You’re going to finish your plate. You don’t move from the table, young man.”

I mean, he got—“You waste? Why you took so much? You see my plate is empty. I put what I’m going to eat, and I’m going to eat what I put on the plate.” I mean, it was a lecture that lasted almost about, gosh, I kid you not, a half an hour.

I said, “Okay, I will not do it again,” just to quiet him.

And that’s how—that was his way of advising or teaching somebody was by example. “You see how I’m doing it? That’s how you do it.”

[01:37:21]

**Beba Touloupis:** His life was Ted’s. Ted’s Restaurant was a huge part of his life. And when he retired, I think it was a struggle for a while for him to finally settle down and be still, it really was, I mean, because this was his being. I mean, he would be here early in the morning and he would stay. He’d be the last one to lock up and leave. Mr. Ted was here. So he is an amazing person and a character, and we are thankful for him to have given us this opportunity of taking

this over. I think we’re doing him proud now after seventeen years. When we got ready to do the murals and the signs, the first thing I said to him, I said to Tasos, I said, “Do you think he’ll be okay if we paint the building?”

He said, “I think he’ll be fine.”

And he said to us, “Whatever you want to do, you have my blessing.” And that was huge that he was trusting us to do whatever we wanted and he knew we would do it well.

[Interviewer’s note: In 2017, the Touloupises restored the classic original metal Ted’s sign in the parking lot and a mural painted on an exterior wall.]

[01:38:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** So when we took down the old panels, the old letters of Ted’s, his daughter Margaret, which we never talked about her yet, said, “Tasos, I want to keep one set.” They’re dual-faced. And I gave her one set because she wanted part of the history.

[01:38:42]

**Eric Velasco:** These were on the sign outside?

[01:38:44]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The big sign outside, you know, the paneling. Used to be—I mean, it was done back in the seventies, and over the years, the exposure in the sun faded the letters and so forth. And the lights were old, some of them didn’t work. So our project this past year was to revitalize the sign, bring in new life, and we changed a little bit the logo, just kind of freshen up like a little restart, refresh button, push it and show that we’re still here and we still matter for all

these people, like my wife, that they are going to UAB and they don’t know Ted’s is here.

Anyways, the signed turned out to be a huge success. It’s clean. It’s great. So we painted it, we put new lights and so forth.

[01:39:37]

**Eric Velasco:** And for listeners, describe the sign, please.

[01:39:41]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The sign is very retro. It’s metal construction. You don’t see these things. It’s kind of like everybody was begging me, “Please, do not take the sign down,” because we had it covered. I had it covered to protect the lights, because we installed the lights earlier than what the paneling was ready, and I didn’t want the lights to get—because they were expensive, LED lights, and the size of the light bulbs is like ten-footers, and they’re specially ordered. So they thought—and it was kind of funny—“Are you selling the restaurant? You’re covering the sign. Are we going to see the sign tomorrow, instead of Ted’s, Donald or McDonald?” *[Laughs]* I said, “No, you’re not going to see that.” But the sign came out to be great. The artist—

[01:40:38]

**Beba Touloupis:** It’s one of the largest freestanding iron signs, vintage signs, I think, in Birmingham. I don’t think there are many more that size for a business that still exists. So we’re pretty excited, the fact that we got to restore it and keep it, make sure it’s around Birmingham for many, many more years, several more generations. *[Interviewer’s note: Two things they did not*

fix were the clocks on two faces of the sign, which for years have been frozen at 3:22 on one side and 11:03 on the other.]

[01:40:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Who came up with the slogan?

[01:41:00]

**Beba Touloupis:** Well, we were working with—

[01:41:03]

**Tasos Touloupis:** It’s a combination of people who were working on our website, and in the process of working with the website, we came with that slogan.

[01:41:13]

**Eric Velasco:** Which is?

[01:41:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** We had help with the people, you know, and we had multiple people working on our website. We wanted something to refresh because the rights to the website, the company, the domain, I should say, the company was no longer in existence, so we wanted to secure, to continue the existence of our domain, of our website. We didn’t want to change our domain all of a sudden, and it was a process. It involved a little more than you think. Oh, okay, the

companies, they will transfer the rights or buy the domain or do this and do that, all those things that you don’t know till you get your feet wet.

And Beba worked hard in everything. We changed a little bit the color, and we wanted the color to be green but not necessarily identical green with the UAB. But we are part of UAB, which is another big tradition for me. It’s very important for me that I’m part of UAB. We’re supporting quite a bit of the athletic program at UAB. And, of course, we’re the official home at Ted’s of every recruit in the basketball, baseball, football, softball.

[01:42:41]

**Eric Velasco:** Explain what you mean by that.

[01:42:44]

**Tasos Touloupis:** When the coaches—and we’re friends with all the coaches—they have a recruit in town and they treat him to lunch, the first stop is at Ted’s. They have to taste a “meat and three.” When they hire a new coach, they have to come to Ted’s. When they hire a new director or associate or in any kind of position, capacity, responsibility, they all come to Ted’s. So we get to know each other and everything.

I have excellent relationship with Coach Shoop, who is the coach, baseball coach. Coach Clark, I know, is great. He loves the cuisine here. We love him too. And Coach Marla, you know, in softball program. I mean, it is great to just be part, and you give them the opportunity to pick up the phone and say, “Tasos, I need a favor. I got this, that, and that,” and you do it, no questions. Just, you know, you make them happy.

[01:43:58]

**Eric Velasco:** How did you become involved with the athletics program at UAB?

[01:44:01]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Oh, that is part of my personality. I cannot stay put. Whatever is happening around me, I’ve got to be involved. I’ve got to be—not necessarily I have the ego of just being “the man,” but I like people. I love to meet people in every capacity, in every position that you have.

Just to give you an example, the president of UAB, Dr. Watts, is supporting me quite a bit. I mean, they love the place. They love the good food. It’s something unique. So they all come here, you know, for a little good food. The beauty of it is that it’s not fast food, but it’s good food fast. You come in, you’re not going to come here to have a meeting and discuss multi-million-dollar business. It’s not the place. But it’s the place to have a little escape, half an hour, eat a good food, and then move on.

[01:45:09]

**Eric Velasco:** With the possible exception of the psychology department, had this been a UAB hangout over the years?

[01:45:16]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The Department of Mathematics, the dean of the mathematics school eats here every day for the past, I don’t know, eight, ten years, I remember. No, I have customers that they just eat here constantly every day. I have people that they walk constantly every day

from Children’s Hospital, UAB medical facilities, because they enjoy the three- or four-block walk. I mean, my goodness, if we were in New York, this is nothing. This is like I am in the heart of everything. But the mentality here, of course, it’s a little different, but it changes with all the development as we see.

But my next goal is to have the green bicycles I have requested to be put out here. Hopefully that will happen, just so we have a venue or a way—an avenue, not a venue, an avenue for everybody to say, “I’m going to grab a bike, go to Ted’s, come back, done.” That will be wonderful if that happens.

And slowly but surely we do things. I’m a person that I tell my project to my wife, and she goes, “We don’t have money for this.”

“I’m just talking.”

“I know you. You’re talking, you know, but it is in your mind, so within a year that project is done.”

But I have to break the news slowly to my wife. It’s not like I’m going to do it tomorrow. I’m thinking about it, you know, and sometimes she forbids me to think, just stay on course. But we accomplished what we accomplished here by chipping a little bit at a time, because having a small business, you don’t necessarily have the ability to say, “I’m going to put this in the budget and that in the budget, because—,” you know.

[01:47:32]

**Eric Velasco:** Something’s always coming up.

[01:47:33]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, it’s nice to hear people you know to say, “It’s not in the budget.” I mean, you do it, you make it, then you bite the bullet and you pay. You borrow from Joe to pay Don and vice versa, and you make it. Somehow you make it if you have faith, God is good and will provide. You’ll make it, you know. That’s our motto.

[01:47:58]

**Eric Velasco:** Mr. Ted insisted that the two of you take on this project. Why? Tell me a little bit about what it’s meant for you.

[01:48:08]

**Beba Touloupis:** For us it’s been challenging but it’s been good. I mean, you know, we were married six years and we took on this job of having Ted’s, and, you know, when we took it over, I said we had no idea what we were getting into. It was amazing. We just had faith in the process and Mr. Ted’s, and we’ve grown as a marriage and as friends and as partners, and we’ve been challenged in so many ways. But, I mean, it’s been quite an experience, and we’re so thankful for it because everything—it was like we were meant to be here. Everything we had done brought us to being at Ted’s. And it’s expanded us personally, expanded our family financially, and it has brought up a new appreciation for what Birmingham is. Like, we didn’t know what Birmingham was until we had Ted’s. We got to experience Birmingham and life in Birmingham.



[01:49:05]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Also that was the condition, because Mr. Ted was working the steam table, and his wife, a great lady, her name is Litsa, L-i-t-s-a, Litsa Sarris, great woman. And we haven’t spent any time for her. She was working the register, that sixty-year-old register. So it was husband and wife, and if you want to buy the restaurant, it will be husband and wife. So we had two boys at the house, and we had to hire a nanny, full-time nanny, because the kids were little, in order to not necessarily to please, but to make the business go as smooth, or the transition. So I can work—

[01:49:55]

**Beba Touloupis:** That’s what we had to do.

[01:49:57]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I can work the steam table and Beba can work the register, and then, of course, after a couple of years when the kids start going to school and Beba had to be a little more involved with the family, I said, “Let me go here, and we’re going to change a few things,” against his best wishes.

[01:50:13]

**Beba Touloupis:** He wasn’t happy about that.

[01:50:15]

**Tasos Touloupis:** But it worked out. But it worked out, you know, because—

[01:50:17]

**Eric Velasco:** What was his reaction?

[01:50:17]

**Beba Touloupis:** He didn’t like the fact that I’m not here every day. He was not happy, and he would—yeah, he was not happy. He would much rather me have been here every day, every day, but, you know, things change. We evolved. We evolved.

[01:50:32]

**Eric Velasco:** But you had three small children at that point.

[01:50:32]

**Beba Touloupis:** Three small children, and they had kids, too, though. They had two children and they did it. But, you know, we did it our way. We did it and we didn’t do everything that Mr. Ted did, but we continued and we tried to continue how he did it, what he did, and the service he provided for the customers and the experience. But we had to do it Tasos and Beba way, and what worked for us, not everything worked for us what Mr. Ted and Litsa did, but I think we carried on most of what he did. And like I said, it really helped us bring a new appreciation for our marriage, for Birmingham, for what we have.

[01:51:11]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The foundation was here. We just built a couple of extra stories above what he already had, and that was the caveat. Like Frank Sinatra said, “Did it my way,” you know, we

did it our way. But it was him who started it. We cannot take credit of creating Ted’s. We cannot take credit of having the clientele we have because of my charming personality, just a lot of people—

[01:51:48]

**Beba Touloupis:** We can take credit for continuing it. That’s about it—

[01:51:50]

**Tasos Touloupis:** For continuing, yes.

[01:51:51]

**Beba Touloupis:** —and making it, surviving.

[01:51:52]

**Tasos Touloupis:** And throwing a little bit of that—

[01:51:55]

**Beba Touloupis:** But I will add one thing, though, is the fact that we have customers here that Mr. Ted had as customers, and the part of our challenges is, and I think Mr. Ted realizes that, is we do having an aging population, and we have a group of millennials out there who don’t even know what a “meat and three” is. They were like me seventeen years ago. So part of our challenge, what we’re realizing, and for us to continue being relevant as Birmingham is growing, is we have to grow the population and grow the customer base. So that’s one of the challenges

and what we’re working on right now, is why we’ve done the murals and refreshed everything and trying to bring a little modern twist and a new appreciation and educating the younger kids, the millennials, of what a “meat and three” is, because I do think that we’re relevant and we have a little piece of history here. 1973. How many businesses are still here? *[Laughs]*

[01:52:51]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Well, it’s a slow process, but we do see a lot of young professionals because also the downtown is filling up with young professionals. Most of Mr. Ted’s customers have retired and have they moved. In other words, when you retire, you don’t see downtown. You just stay either in Hoover or Pelham or whatever they’re staying, you know, wherever they live.

I said that early on, and, again, we started catering, and we built the catering business from ground zero. Mr. Ted did not do any catering.

[01:53:36]

**Eric Velasco:** When did that start?

[01:53:37]

**Tasos Touloupis:** That started almost four, five years into—by 2004, ’05, I started promoting the catering. I remember myself, I came with idea of Thanksgiving packages, and we did that, and we were frying turkeys. Back then, it was the trendy thing to do, and we were promoting a dinner for fifteen people for an incredibly—like eighty bucks when we started, for fifteen people with a fried turkey and a couple of trimmings and dessert and so forth or whatever, you know, just a nice meal. I’m not saying it was the whole Thanksgiving dinner table, but it was a nice

supplement that you didn’t have to worry about. And it was hard work. I mean, I remember the second year when we start the fried turkeys, we fried 120-plus turkeys.

[*Interruption*]

[01:54:38]

**Eric Velasco:** So we were talking about the challenges of trying to attract the millennial crowd, but when we cut off, we were talking about trying to do the Thanksgiving fried turkeys.

[01:54:48]

**Tasos Touloupis:** We managed to be successful for about four or five years, but it was hard work, fighting the element of cold weather in November, and having four or five fryers outside, that they were huge, and I was frying five turkeys at the same time in a fryer, and doing the squash casserole, the yams, the macaroni and cheese, the creamed potatoes, and so forth or whatever.

So we were closed—we closed the restaurant on Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, and that’s what we were doing, and preparing the pecan pies and the sweet potato pies, everything from scratch. People loved it. It was too hard work, and then Tasos was dead Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. So I said, “Where’s the Thanksgiving?” [*Laughs*]

So after years, that trend just—I’ve done it, I think, for five years, something like that, and there are still websites that if you Google “fried turkey,” our name pops up. People calling me, “Hey, I want to order fried turkey for Thanksgiving.”

I said, “Honey, you know, I haven’t done it for ten years.”

“But the website says you do.” But that website has not updated, and I don’t think we’ll ever update it.

And we speak, like the catering business, we emphasize downtown area. We have a lot of clients. UAB is number one. The medical facility, Children’s Hospital. And our meats, that’s what they want. It’s a nice and pleasant surprise to have lunch from Ted’s because it’s hot meal. It’s fresh meat and fresh vegetables. It’s what the doctor ordered for the day, and our goal is to build that. My goal is to build that by—that’s why we generated a new website. That’s why we try to stay ahead of social media and Instagram and Facebook and—

[01:57:08]

**Beba Touloupis:** Twitter.

[01:57:10]

**Tasos Touloupis:** My lovely wife is in charge of all these things, because I like to talk, I like to look at a face, and I like to talk, I look to book, I like to—instead of emails and correspondence. She’s more patient with that. I’m more of a person-to-person interaction, and that’s why I love to be at the restaurant talking to the customers, having fun.

If you come one day and set up a camera right here where the bar is, and I’m working the register and you monitor and you record the comments, the teasing, and the interaction I have with the customers, you’re going to have plenty of material for a TV show, you know, called *The Restaurant*. Like *Cheers*, this is the restaurant. Or should I say the Greek restaurant, or the crazy Greek who’s teasing everybody and is messing with everybody, but everybody’s have a good time.

[01:58:14]

**Eric Velasco:** And the regulars know your family. I saw the guys were teasing your son the other day.

[01:58:17]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct, correct.

[01:58:19]

**Beba Touloupis:** They’ve grown up in here, you know. Alexi was in a bouncy seat, pumpkin chair, whatever you call them. John was two. So they were on the crates. For the longest time, they would come in and they’d want to play—not play, they’d want to do the register. Once they started counting and they could give change, they would stand at the register and they would give people the dollars, the 50 cents, and they would tease us, child labor laws, and they would just look and, “What does that mean, Mom?”

I said, “Don’t worry.” But they literally have grown up in this place.

[01:58:48]

**Tasos Touloupis:** It is the typical family-owned business where the customers interact with the owners, the owners interact with the customers, where we like to make our business—I mean “our business” up to a point—their business—family, in other words, who we are and what we stand for, and we take the same back from our customers. To me, that’s the beauty of a small business, that you know your customers and your customers know who the owners are, they know what they stand for, what they believe, what their convictions are, what their children

doing or where they are. Oh, my gosh, they’re grown up or are they now out of high school, they’re in college. It’s like an extended family. It’s not just “I went to a very nice classy restaurant, the waiter was good, the food was good.” Okay. That’s it. There is more conversation when they say, “Oh, I went to Ted’s. Guess what? That crazy Tasos did this, said that, did this, came to the table, did this, did that. We had fun. We had fun.”

[02:00:09]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s like your home away from home.

[02:00:10]

**Beba Touloupis:** It is. To give you an example of our history, we had a good customer who used to come in here once a week, maybe, with his dad, and his dad was an elderly gentleman, and he was eating with Mr. Ted and Litsa, and Jimmy started eating here. So Jimmy came in with the whole family a couple weeks ago, and I said, “Uh-oh.” The whole family, they were dressed up. I saw the waitresses talking to them, they were hugging him. I said, “Uh-oh.”

So he gets to the register. “So,” I said, “what’s going on?”

He’s like, “Well, we lost Dad. We just had his funeral. I don’t know if you know this, but Dad and I always ate our vegetables here.”

I said, “Yes, we knew that you ate your three vegetables here.”

“And Dad told me you have to always eat your vegetables, and every time I come, I get my vegetables here with Dad.” He said, “This was a great experience and a great place for us, and now we brought the kids to come and honor where Dad loved to eat and get his vegetables.” And that was really cool. I mean, that’s what Ted’s is all about, where you become our family



and we get to know you, and it’s not just grabbing a plate and sitting down and walking out. It’s not going to happen when you come here. It’s not.

[02:01:26]

**Tasos Touloupis:** We had another lovely lady, and for her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday she came to Ted’s Restaurant. She passed away. When she came here, we knew each other because she was regular. She was in a home, but she was 96, 97, 98, 99, 100. When she said, “It’s 100”—I never allow anybody to sing “Happy Birthday” because I find it rather annoying to interrupt the whole restaurant because somebody’s celebrating happy birthday, and the clap and this and the cheers, whatever. Happy birthday, it’s okay. It’s all right. But that day, that particular day when my lady was here, I screamed to everybody and I said, “All right. The lady here is my best customer. She’s been here for so long, and we’re celebrating her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.” She was so strong. She had a clarity of vision. We sang “Happy Birthday,” and I said, “I wish you the best in health from here on, and I want to see you again next year to celebrate 101<sup>st</sup>.”

She goes, “As long as I eat my Ted’s vegetables, I’ll live another year to see you.”

I said, “Golly, where is the video? Where’s the recorder?” I mean, what a testimony, 100-year-old lady to say, “As long as I eat my Ted’s vegetables, I’ll live another year.” I mean, it was so emotional, so incredible.

But, again, that was the old guard, as they grow, and hopefully some of them that were great and the kids were lucky enough to pass on the attitude, “Eat your vegetables.” But I think, you know, the mentality of fresh vegetables and farm-to-table is coming, and at Ted’s we’ve been doing this since 1973. Now all of sudden it’s the farm-to-table. In other words, we’ll ship you the fresh vegetables and we’ll show you how to cook it at the house.

Anyways, but we’ve been doing this, and we’ve been doing that with relative success, and people are used to it. Sometimes we have fights with the customers. Oh, for example— today’s Wednesday? All right. Monday and Tuesday I didn’t have squash. There was no squash in the market. This is the month. Oh, it was like it was about to be a riot. “Where is the squash casserole? I came here for my squash casserole, squash.” So the clients, the customers know exactly what they’re going to eat, and they get in the car, the car knows the way, it automatically brings them here, and God forbid if either I screw up and I don’t buy anything or it’s out. I mean, if it’s not in the market, I can’t cook it. Anyways, but—

[02:04:45]

**Eric Velasco:** Where are you getting your produce from?

[02:04:47]

**Tasos Touloupis:** We buy our produce from the Farmers’ Market, primarily Kontos. Kontos has evolved. That’s another Greek, the banana man, Kontos, you know, just started the banana stand. He used to sell bananas from South America and built an empire. Now they do all kind of vegetables, so I go over there. I give my order. I go twice a week, sometimes three times, it all depends, and I get all the vegetables loaded up, bring it over here. [Interviewer’s note: Alex Kontos started his fruit company in 1888 and made a fortune by cornering the local market for bananas, then a novelty fruit. His company is still in business, run by a Kontos.]

[02:05:17]

**Eric Velasco:** Mr. Kontos, I mean, he goes back to the beginning, late 1800s.

[02:05:21]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct, correct. Correct, correct. What a story. I mean, really, you know, you study the story, how it started, how it evolved, how it has expanded, you know, again, the Greeks.

[02:05:39]

**Eric Velasco:** What is it that made all these different Greek people such successful entrepreneurs?

[02:05:46]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The desire to create. When these people migrated back then, it was not to leave a situation because another situation was better, but it was to leave a situation and move to an environment that they have the opportunity to be successful, to be creative, because in Greece the sources, the resources, I should say, they were very, very limited, especially after the war. After the war, you know, the whole country was devastated. There were not that many jobs. The government was moving slow in rebuilding. It was not like the rebuilding of Germany, because they got all the help from the United States. Greece was just the last place on Earth, you know, to receive help. But all these people who migrated said, “I’m going to go and make a better life for my children,” and that—

[02:06:53]

**Beba Touloupis:** The U.S. was the land of opportunity.

[02:06:54]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Exactly. That hunger, that hunger, that starvation was so strong, and that’s what made all these stories, the successful stories about the Greek immigration, because even though the perception might be that the Greeks are lazy, they retire at the age of fifty, that’s why they’re broke, I mean, we’re hardworking people.

[02:07:25]

**Beba Touloupis:** And we seem to have an endless need to continue better lives for our children. Like Tasos and I, we had good lives compared to Mr. Ted did, but it seems like we had a constant journey for better. Like Tasos came here for his education, I came for my education, and we want better. We want to do better, and we have. We’ve worked. We’ve put our kids in great schools. They’re in college now. They’re first-generation Americans, and they will, hopefully, hope. We’re teaching them to do that, to want better, to continue providing and giving back to society and being productive. I mean, it’s like this is just a drive within us to keep doing better, and I think that’s what keeps us going every day is the family doing better and giving back, which is huge for us too. It’s like you have to be thankful and grateful for what we’ve been given and help to give back some of it.

[02:08:23]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I wish I had a picture of my first one, John, at the age of six. He drew a little drawing and he put the restaurant, Ted’s, and then he put a Greek flag, an American flag, and a Bahamian flag, and he was trying to determine the percentage.

[02:08:45]

**Beba Touloupis:** He’s all three of them combined.

[02:08:46]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Right, combined. In other words, that is the mix of the ethnicities. But he was asking, “Okay, am I 50 percent American and 40 percent Greek and 10 percent Bahamian?” We had fun for about a week just trying to determine the percentages and what country. But that’s the beauty about being—and I don’t consider myself an immigrant because I am not an immigrant per se with the broad definition that you migrate for a better future. I came here on a student visa to receive education, so therefore I don’t call—but I became an immigrant because I stayed and I changed my citizenship. Right now I have a dual citizenship, of course, but it was a little different for both of us versus her parents, who migrated for the purpose of to make a home, a new home, a home in a new country.

[02:10:00]

**Eric Velasco:** And find new opportunities.

[02:10:02]

**Tasos Touloupis:** That was the power and the energy that the Greek immigrants had early on, to come over here, work hard, because the opportunities are here, and then they sent a message to the village where they came from, or to the city, and then they brought in a relative, a cousin, a friend, and that’s how you see the communities building up.

[02:10:32]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you go back home often?

[02:10:34]

**Tasos Touloupis:** I try to go every two years, three years. It’s rather difficult because I don’t want to leave the restaurant, close the business, but we established, in fact, to close for ten days during the Fourth of July, and we manage to escape. Beba sometimes stays behind or she comes along. If things are a little better, you just want to close during the Christmastime and New Year’s, and then, of course, during the Fourth of July the downtown of Birmingham is about 50 percent vacant. Everybody is taking off. It’s barbecue time. It’s not fresh vegetables. And that’s when we try to take our vacation as a family together.

[02:11:35]

**Eric Velasco:** Why is it important to go back home?

[02:11:37]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Important because family values, you know, are very strong in the Greek culture, and the fact that you left and you left your family there, your mother, your relatives, your sisters, it’s very, very important. The other important thing is that you expose your kids to who the parents are, where they come from. We used to go to the Bahamas when my mother-in-law used to live there, and they loved it, and they were going for a whole month and I was joining them during the window of Fourth of July.

So now my middle son, Alexis, wants to learn Greek, all three of them accusing me for being lazy, not forcing them to learn Greek by speaking to them Greek, but they do know—they have a small vocabulary in Greek language, the one that you don’t want to hear, and that’s how they start. But they do understand the culture. They love the food. They’ve been there a couple of times. And it is nice to carry on the pride, the culture, the religion. The Greek Orthodoxy is very important to us. It’s very, very important to continue, and you cannot continue by being absent, by not recognizing where you come from, so it is—

[02:13:18]

**Beba Touloupis:** And they don’t have any roots here. They don’t have anybody here to help them, other than my mom moving with them. So in order for them to be able to figure out who they and where their roots are, they need to make those trips and to figure out who they are and what does it mean for them to be Greek. They’re learning it. They love Greece and they have many great trips, and they’re figuring it out. John actually wrote a paper on what it means to be Greek and how that Greek heritage has shaped him. So they’re figuring it out.

[02:13:51]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s one of the things that fascinates me about the Greeks in Birmingham. I’m a third-generation Mexican American, so our family, assimilation was everything. My father, whose parents came over from Guadalajara, didn’t speak a word of Spanish. Here what I see is a very strong desire, pull to assimilate, to be a good American, to speak the language, it’s essential for business and all that, but I also see equal importance placed on maintaining just cultural identity here.

[02:14:29]

**Beba Touloupis:** Yes.

[02:14:30]

**Tasos Touloupis:** And you can see that with the Greek Festival, because the Greek Festival in Birmingham is the biggest in size and revenue in the whole region of Southeast, and the Greek community here, as far as size, is relatively small. It’s not that big. There are only 800 families. But the Greek Festival we put is so strong, so big, so beautiful because all the Greeks are just so strong in the food, the religion, the music, the dances. So everybody has a tremendous experience. If you live in Birmingham and you don’t go to the Greek Festival every year, then you’re like, “Check.” You get a checkmark. [*Laughs*]

The other thing is that part of us was all the restaurants that there are like in—oh, Birmingham Originals also is an association, consisted of independent restaurants like me, and there are about thirty-five, forty members, and being a part of that organization also saved and helped tremendously in our success here, and we continue to participate in their activities raising money for charities and putting a big festival, food festival.

[02:16:16]

**Eric Velasco:** Breaking Bread? [Interviewer’s note: Breaking Bread is an annual charity fundraiser by Birmingham Originals.]



[02:16:18]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The Breaking Bread, yes. But the Greek Festival is unbelievable, so the kids, my kids, start dancing early on, and they love to dance. They love the music. They were asking me, “Dad, teach me these steps,” and so forth or whatever. So you know what? You take a lot of pride when your blood, your children, come to you and say, “Teach me what used to be 100 percent yours and you brought it here and you continue.” And that is a wonderful feeling. That is a wonderful feeling. As a matter of fact, I’m taking two of them spring break just for ten days’ escape. I’m going to leave my beautiful wife in charge, and I’m just going to take a little trip to Greece to see my family, but also take the kids. I said, “What do you all want to do spring break?”

“Oh, can we go to Florida?”

I said, “Done. Call Florida ‘Greece.’” And they’re excited. We’re looking forward to it.

[02:17:31]

**Eric Velasco:** One thing I have neglected to ask you about earlier is talk to me a little bit about the food you serve here. It seems to be a fairly even mix of classic southern meats and vegetables and Greek food.

[02:17:46]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Correct. You said it. The Greek food is, for example, we’re famous for the Greek chicken. Everybody says, “I don’t know how you do it. It falls off the bone.” The Greek, the Souvlaki, which is typical Greek; the Pastitsio, which is the casserole with the spaghetti and the meat sauce and the béchamel sauce. The meatloaf, I cannot say that it’s not Greek and I

cannot say it is not southern. It’s kind of like everywhere, but there are different variations. The meatloaf is really good.

Then, of course, we have the best fried chicken and the best fried fish and the fried tenders. We do such a good job frying the food because they are not greasy. It’s very crunchy and very—my guy, my short cook—my short-order cook, I should say, my frying man, is doing a wonderful job.

The one item that nobody does as good job as we do is the fried chicken livers. That particular dish, either you love it or you really hate it. There’s no if then, or I’ve tasted it, or I’ll have it today or maybe next month. And I have people that they just come here just for the fried chicken livers. We do a great job on that.

Then you move to we invented a stir-fry chicken breast with red bell peppers and onions, and I called it Chicken Bahama. They were asking, “Why Chicken Bahama?”

And I said, “Because my wife is from the Bahamas. I cannot have a Greek chicken and not have a Chicken Bahama.” We called it Chicken Bahama. We try to have fun.

[Laughs] I’ll tell you one thing—

[02:19:48]

**Eric Velasco:** So that wasn’t one of Mr. Ted’s recipes then?

[02:19:51]

**Tasos Touloupis:** No, no, it was not. It was ours.

Then we came up with a Chicken Pot Pie and Chicken Dumplings. We’ll make the dumplings fresh—I mean, not fresh; from scratch. We make our own dumplings, and people

complain that they get more chicken than dumplings—imagine that—because they’re so good, especially when they are from scratch that day. So we established all that, and then we brought in on the vegetable side the fried green tomatoes, the Brussels sprouts that people love it, and we—

[02:20:28]

**Beba Touloupis:** The squash casserole.

[02:20:29]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The squash casserole is brand new. We added that and the broccoli casserole. And in addition to that, Mr. Ted used to have just the regular squash, regular broccoli. So we have that. We introduced that.

In addition to yams, we introduced her recipe, my wife’s recipe, the roasted sweet potatoes with rosemary, that they’re a little healthier than the yams, okay, and they’re delicious. And we have the creamed potatoes are real potatoes, of course. But what is the number one vegetable for every catering is the mac and cheese. The macaroni and cheese is so rich, I’m going to tell you.

[02:21:22]

**Beba Touloupis:** Real cheese and milk.

[02:21:23]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Yeah, but it has real ingredients, no cutting corners, and it’s loaded, but it is so rich, so yummy. And if you look at the production wall, every catering that I have, nine out of ten caterings, one vegetable is going to be mac and cheese.

[02:21:44]

**Eric Velasco:** A true southern tradition, mac and cheese as a vegetable.

[02:21:48]

**Beba Touloupis:** Oh, yes.

[02:21:49]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Mac and cheese, but it’s a Greek recipe, and I introduced that.

[02:21:54]

**Eric Velasco:** How so?

[02:21:54]

**Tasos Touloupis:** How so? Well, if I tell the secret recipe on the airwaves, I might lose a lot of business. I use a Greek sauce. It’s not just the regular milk and cheese. I make the sauce separate and then mix it and then add more cheese. If you have a question, you need to come and taste it and then we’ll talk.

[02:22:22]

**Eric Velasco:** Sounds good to me. Well, on that note, I think we’ll wind down now. I do appreciate. Do you have anything that I missed here that you want to add?

[02:22:31]

**Tasos Touloupis:** Birmingham’s a wonderful city, it’s a foodie city, and Ted’s Restaurant is an institution because of the longevity and the appeal, the personality, the freshness.

[02:22:49]

**Beba Touloupis:** Hospitality. We give hospitality.

[02:22:51]

**Tasos Touloupis:** The hospitality, the personality, the freshness of the food, and it will continue to be here, you know, for the next thirty years.

[02:23:00]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, I do appreciate that. Thank you very much for taking the time with me, for sitting down to this interview.

[02:23:06]

**Tasos Touloupis:** We thank you for the opportunity.

[02:23:08]

**Beba Touloupis:** Thank you.

[02:23:09]

**Eric Velasco:** At this point, we’re going to sit in silence for thirty seconds while we let the tape run out.

[*END OF INTERVIEW*]