

**AJAY PATEL**  
**London Sizzler – Houston, TX**

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Date: June 17, 2014  
Location: London Sizzler – Houston, TX  
Interviewer: Amy C. Evans  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 46 minutes  
Project: Houston's Underbelly

**[Begin Ajay Patel—London Sizzler Interview]****00:00:01**

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Tuesday, January [Interviewer's note: June] 17, 2014. I'm in Houston, Texas, at London Sizzler Restaurant on Hillcroft with Ajay Patel. And Ajay, if I could get you to state your name and describe your occupation for the record, please?

**00:00:19**

**Ajay Patel:** Hi. Yeah, my name is Ajay Patel and I'm—I'm the manager here, manager/owner/operator here at the London Sizzler. It's an Indian restaurant, bar and grill. It's not your typical Indian restaurant. We—we also, you know, we're from—obviously, I'm from England and so our food that we—that we do make here is predominantly made—it's Indian-made British-style as—as there are a lot of Indians in England, as you know. So I pretty much run the show—we run the restaurant here and we've been here for about ten years in operation. You know, it's been—it's been a good ride so far, and we hope to you know go another ten years definitely. And—and—

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**AE:** Could I ask you to also state your birthday for the record?

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**AP:** Yeah, my birthday is July 16, 1979.

**00:01:14**

**AE:** But—and let me know where you were born?

**00:01:18**

**AP:** I was born in Woodland, California, U.S.A., and I was raised in England.

**00:01:23**

**AE:** Can you explain that timeline and how that worked out?

**00:01:25**

**AP:** Okay, my parents came in 19—my parents came here in 1975 or 1976 they came and moved to California. I had—I had already have an older sister at the time, obviously. Then they conceived me here in America in California and after—when I was two years old, in 1981, they moved back to England. And they had a business here—had a hotel, and they sold the hotel and they moved back to England. And so and then they—after that occupation, then they went into the snack business, and they manufactured Indian snacks and sweets.

**00:02:09**

**AE:** Okay. And state your parents' names for me, if you would.

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**AP:** Yeah; my dad's name is Naresh Kamal Patel and my mom's name is Surekha Patel.

**00:02:18**

**AE:** Okay. And so did your parents come from India to California and then to England or India, England, to California; or England to California? *[Laughs]*

**00:02:28**

**AP:** No, my—see, my mom was born in England, and my dad was born in Africa in Kenya—Mombasa—and—and, I believe my dad—my dad was born there, and then he went to India. They moved to India, and then from India they moved over to England. But my mom—my granddad on my mom’s side, basically they moved over from India straight to London and then my mom—and then that’s when my mom and her younger were born—in England. And then obviously they—they met each other and everything, and they had a common arranged marriage, too, and then they decided—they had my older sister and then they decided hey—obviously, at that time America was an in-thing kind of trend where people were going and, you know, and investing in and stuff like that, so they wanted—you know, they wanted—well, their dad wanted to send them, right, so that’s how it works. So they came.

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**AE:** Do you know how they picked California?

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**AP:** Um, they was—they—they had relatives already here, and they had some relatives basically that—that had shown them how to run the hotel and whatever and give them guidance basically and they found the—the hotel that they were going to buy. They found one in California, and they thought obviously it was a good investment. It was in a—it’s right where the—I believe right where—it’s near Fortuna, basically, where the big red trees are, where

they're so big that you can drive in between the tree trunk, like it's that big. So and that's basically was there and that's a tourist destination, so obviously the hotel is good there.

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**AE:** And so then they went back to England and got out of the hotel business. And what did they do when they went back there?

**00:04:05**

**AP:** Um, when they went back—back to England they—they were hoping—my dad's dad already had a snack business, and one of the reasons why him—so my dad had—has an older brother and he had—he had been sent—he had also been sent to America, as well. And he was in Midland-Odessa [Texas]. He had bought two hotels there. He also sold his and went back to England, as well. The snack business was doing really, really well. And they needed help and obviously, with family, they want to try and keep it in the family, so they ended up all going back.

**00:04:34**

And then maybe I think they weren't comfortable here. Maybe they didn't have the right guidance from the right kind of people, you know, as far as like whatever—didn't mesh well and stuff so they ended up just saying, "Hey, you know what? Let's just go back, and we'll have a lot more support and family around us," you know, and that kind of thing. So they ended—they ended up both on the same—well, actually, my—my parents went back first, and then they followed shortly after a year or two. And then they—so yeah, when they went back they all—they were working in the snack business. After the snack business, my mom's dad had an Indian restaurant in London. And that's, I think, how they met because he had a—like my mom's dad

had an Indian restaurant, and my dad's dad are in the snack business, and so they were two foodies, and so they arranged a marriage, like, hey you—these people have the same kind of business, you know. Whatever, you want to meet them or whatever or—so? And I guess that's how it came about.

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So then what happened was my granddad and grandma moved from London to Leicester and—because obviously, grandchildren and stuff, and then, at that time, then my dad and my—my dad and mom opened a new restaurant in Leicester. And they had that for about—they had that for about four years, I believe. But during that four years, they opened a snack business, as well, and it was becoming too much; it was, you know, I mean, there was no time for us as well and stuff, so they decided to give up one and they gave up the restaurant, but they sold it to my mom's younger brother. So it was still in the family and—and everything and you know, so and then basically, in England, you live on top of your business, you know. That's how—that's how it is, and so we would live upstairs and then, you know, we had this retail deal downstairs, the snack business and stuff.

**00:06:18**

**AE:** Now would you mind, you told a story about that—when I saw you last week—about sneaking some food from—?

**00:06:24**

**AP:** Oh, yeah. *[Laughs]* It was funny because, you know, when we grew up—when we were growing up—when we were growing up we were pretty—pretty strict, you know, on—on—because you're around food all the time and so, you know, it was kind of—my mom was pretty

strict on like basically, the—they, like my mom wears glasses and my dad wears glasses and then, obviously, some of that is hereditary, so she'd make me and my older sister eat carrots every day when we came home from school.

**00:06:48**

And then sometimes they would make nice—nice things, but they're not good for you. And so we would help my younger sister go down and—I didn't tell you this one, but I would have my younger sister, because she wouldn't get in trouble, go down and—and like just grab—steal the food, basically, from downstairs and bring it back upstairs. And the make her—she just did it; we didn't know where she went, you know, but we were the ones telling her to do it and stuff.

**00:07:13**

And then me, as well, also I remember, when I was young, I'd have—I'd go and I'd have to sneak something and put it in my pocket and kind of go because it was—you know, it was pretty strict over there, you know, when you're young in the family and stuff, so yeah, it was—it was—. I remember them days, so—.

**00:07:30**

**AE:** Do you remember the favorite thing that—that she would sneak or that you would sneak?

**00:07:33**

**AP:** Yeah. Right after they come out of the fryer, when they're nice and hot they're called—they're called *batata vada*, and basically they're—inside, they're made with mashed potato. They have a little bit of garlic or ginger and chili, onions, and cilantro, and they're boiled. And basically, what they do, they boil the potato, they mash it up; they add the stuff, and then they

make balls out of it, and then what they do is they tear the ball and they dip it in a batter like a fish—like a [fish and] chip shop batter, but we use—all batter is made of lentil flour and so what they do is they'll dip it in that, and they'll fry it.

00:08:05

And when it comes out, it's good. *[Laughs]*

00:08:09

**AE:** So if I could back up, your mother grew up in the restaurant business because her—her family had it.

00:08:15

**AP:** Yeah, well she didn't but—but she wasn't actually—she was more—she stayed at home, mainly. She wasn't actually at the restaurant, you know. Mainly, it was the—it was my granddad and then, I believe, his partner and, you know, but there wasn't a lot of involvement for—for my mom or even her mom, my grandma. My grandma worked in the bakery, actually, in fact. And sometimes it's—or I think, I guess, they chose to do it that way because they wanted it better that way, just to keep it kind of separate, like separate and stuff because at that time back—back at that time, basically, you know, they didn't make—they weren't making a whole lot of money. You know, it was the first business they started. And so when they first got there, I remember Grandma worked a bakery. My granddad had to do a lot of—lot of different jobs and stuff and I—from what I hear, back in the day they would—you know, the restroom was outside. It was an outhouse; there wasn't, you know—. They would have like—they would make lentils, basically. You know, every other day they'd make lentils because it's cheaper to make lentils. And then make the like tortilla, flour tortilla. What we have is called *chapati* and stuff. And they would

make—they would make big pots because they'd have a lot of people come and stay at their house.

**00:09:25**

Like, let's say when someone is coming into the country or the first day, you would help them out because they couldn't afford to—living was very expensive, as well, still even at that time. So they would—everyone helped their relatives out, you know. So the household would be—there would be a lot of people staying in the house. So they would make loads of food, like batches of it, and it would last like two or three days and eat the same food for two or three days. And that's how it was. And I guess we're spoiled now but, you know, that's the way it is.

**00:09:52**

**AE:** So about how old were you and your siblings when your parents moved to Leicester and opened the restaurant there?

**00:09:58**

**AP:** I was, hmm, when I was small. I was two—I was two, and then the restaurant—so when we had the shop, I mean it's not—when we opened the snack shop, I was around about maybe seven, I would say, around about probably about six or seven, I would say—right about that time when we had the snack shop, definitely, yeah. And I lived with my—I actually lived with my—when my parents—when my parents came back when I was two years old, I was pretty mischievous, and so they had to watch—they would obviously work and they would have to watch me at the same time and, you know, they'd have to try and watch me at the same time.

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But then I caused a lot of problems there at the store. I'd waste a lot of the food. Like I would—like they'd maybe make a batch of food, and I'd take them up and put the whole mop in there, you know, and stuff, and then I'd ruin all the food that they just prepared. And so basically, yeah, they—they sent me to my—they sent me to my mom's mom and dad's house in London. So I stayed with them for almost—I think about a year—maybe one or two years, I stayed with them. **[Laughs]**

**00:10:55**

**AE:** Wow. **[Laughs]**

**00:10:58**

**AP:** They shipped me off because it was—I was pretty—I was pretty bad and stuff and so, yeah. I went and lived with them.

**00:11:04**

**AE:** And yet they trust you to be in business with them today.

**00:11:06**

**AP:** Yeah, they do. **[Laughs]**

**00:11:09**

**AE:** Okay. So back to the timeline. And when would your family have arrived in Houston and why Houston?

**00:11:16**

**AP:** Okay, so as I—as I was born in America, when I was growing up and when I was going to school there, and I had applied to go to the University in England. And when I applied to go to different universities in London and University of London, I had been accepted, as well, into university. At the same time I was also thinking, as well, like for my future, as well, like hey, you know, would—even though my friends are all there in England and everything is well, you know, I felt that hey, since I have this opportunity, there must have been a reason why maybe—hey, you know, I was conceived in America or whatever, to use that—you know, to use that citizenship and come here and study and—and do something, you know.

**00:11:55**

So at eighteen, I ended up coming to America. I lived in—in let's see—Dallas for a year and I did two semesters there. Then I moved to Denver, Colorado, and then I did a semester at a community college. And after that, I went to aviation school. And so I got my aviation degree from there. But I don't use it.

**00:12:16**

**AE:** And that was in Mississippi, right?

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**AP:** No, that was in Denver, Colorado, yeah.

**00:12:21**

**AE:** Did you tell me that you went to school in Meridian?

**00:12:23**

**AP:** Yeah, I had—I had—I did—had lived in Mississippi in McComb when I was thirteen years old. When I was thirteen, I had come here to live. It was around—I was here for about two or three months, and then it didn't work out and stuff, so then I ended up going back to England.

**00:12:41**

**AE:** Okay, I didn't realize you were that young when you were in Mississippi, okay. Now you were telling me you had visited Jackson and you remember those parts?

**00:12:45**

**AP:** Yeah, I remember them. Yeah, definitely, because when the family I lived with, yeah, they would—they would travel a lot, you know, and stuff, and I became very familiar, and their son also used to take me around and take me out everywhere, as well. He'd—he'd—they lived in Mississippi—McComb—and he—he used to go to Louisiana State University. And I remember this because, at that time, Louisiana—Louisiana State, itself, was the only state where you could drink at eighteen years old, and I was from England so even though I was only thirteen, fourteen, still we're still accustomed to start drinking earlier than the twenty-one age limit that you have here.

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**AE:** So do you have any memories from your time in Mississippi? And I ask, selfishly, because I've spent a lot of time in Mississippi.

**00:13:22**

**AP:** Oh, yeah, I loved Mississippi. I really did—really liked Mississippi a lot. It was—I love the weather there, actually. I’ll be honest with you. And, like as I was saying, as well, how in Houston there’s no seasons. You know, here, you—it’s hot one day, and next week it will be really cold and stuff, you know. And in Mississippi, I thought the weather was more definitely a lot easier on people, you know, and you could—there’s a transition, so—and just I mean food was great. I mean, I didn’t really—we did—we did eat out and stuff, but we didn’t eat out that much because the family I lived with, as well, they were more like a traditional family, you know—have home-cooked meals and this or that, so I never really got to eat out too much.

**00:14:04**

**AE:** May I ask what that family did for a living?

**00:14:07**

**AP:** Hotels. [*Laughs*] Yeah, they were all in the hotel business, basically.

**00:14:12**

**AE:** Yeah, there’s a long history of Indian immigrants being hotel owners in Mississippi, and just now I think Indian restaurants starting to pop up in—.

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**AP:** Yeah, I still remember going—when I was nineteen, we went to the Indian restaurant in New Orleans. It was the only one that they had in New Orleans and I—and I even remember, it’s an Indian restaurant where you have to like drive into this alleyway kind of thing, and it’s on the right hand side at the end. And it’s like a white building and stuff. And it was really—it wasn’t

big; it wasn't huge. I know that was the only one because we used to drive down to New Orleans, as well, often. And I remember the bridge, as well, when I was thirteen. So I remember all that. And when I took my bachelor party over there—and we had it recently *[Laughs]*—the memories still come back.

**00:14:56**

**AE:** Okay. So back to your—your family and getting here and to this restaurant, tell me a little bit about that.

**00:15:02**

**AP:** Yeah. So basically, I graduated right after nine-eleven [September 11, 2011; the day of the World Trade Center bombing in New York City], so I couldn't get a job. My parents—I had put a file in for my parents to come here to emigrate here so at—that file had gone through and so then they ended up coming—coming here, as well. So I decided—I'm more of a Southern person. I like the—nothing against everyone else, but I just think the hospitality and, in general, the people are more friendly here in the South. And so I just felt—I thought my parents would fit in better here, and that's why I ended up moving back to Dallas. I loved Denver and everything and, you know, but I just—I'm a better fit for Dallas. And so I moved to Dallas, and we have some relatives that live there, as well. And so and then my parents emigrated and, actually, in the beginning—because obviously, I was raised in the food business, so my first—my first thing was okay, I can't find a job but—and I'm—I want to be in business. I've had various other jobs as a student. I worked at Costco and, you know, Best Buy, and I've done all them other jobs, as well, but I wanted to do something else. I wanted to have—I wanted to eventually own my own

business. Obviously, it's going to do with food. And I have a good support, obviously, from my parents because they've been in that business, as well.

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So, in the beginning, I was going to buy a Chinese restaurant, which is weird, but I would have liked to have learn a bit about, you know, how the cuisine is cooked and things like that or whatever and—and run, you know—running it today and stuff. That didn't work out, and so that fell through. And I believe the second business I was looking at was a bagel—was a bagel shop, like a bagel shop, and they had—they had other things, as well, but it was near an office building and I was—we were going to take it over and change the menu and stuff and like facilitate for the offices and stuff and everything, as well. And then that didn't work. That didn't work out. The guy did a runner [ran out on the deal] and all this other stuff. We didn't lose any money or anything like that but, you know, it wasn't—the guy was being a little bit shady and stuff like that.

**00:16:57**

So then I decided, oh, you know, maybe, you know what? Dallas is not meant to be, and America is huge, right? I don't have to just stick to Dallas or, you know, whatever. Obviously, being comfortable, if you could find something in Dallas—why because you have support, you have relatives there and stuff like that, as well, you know. So you can have a little bit more of a social life. So then I decided to, you know, drive out to Austin, and I made a trip out to California. I made a trip out to, obviously, Houston. I made a trip—different, various different places. Houston, I found, was like—I saw this—this spot here and it was right off the freeway. I liked it. It wasn't as—as busy as it is today, obviously, at that time, you know. I—I was introduced to a gentleman that owned—owned a grocery—a grocery store in a complex here, and he had been here for twenty—almost, at that point, I think, maybe twenty- twenty-two years

at that point. It was like twenty-two years he had been there. So just him, and then he had introduced me to this—this restaurant here, this spot here, and said, “Hey, this is the restaurant that used to be here a long time ago, and if you guys are—

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At that point we weren't really—I'll be honest with you. At that point, we weren't really—wanting to do a restaurant. I'll be honest with you. What we wanted to do was just do the snack shop because it's a little bit easier because we've—you know, we've done it, and we know how to do it. It's a lot easier. And there's probably more demand for the snacks, at that time, even as well.

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And then this part—this place was too big. So, okay, we cut it down. And then, you know, we started talking, and I said, “Hey, you know what?” There's—there are regular Indian restaurants of like fine-dining level; even in England they have them. But then what they've done is now is like some people will take over an old pub or—or a bar or something where they have TV screens and things like that and they watch—they have televised events and things like that. And then they play Indian music like—they do play Indian music, but it's a little bit more upbeat kind of style. And—and there are bars and grills, and the Indian bars and grills over there, more casual like—casual kind of, you know—you know.

**00:18:49**

And so we decided, hey, you know, no one has that; I've not seen a single one of them here, and let's just do something different. And I think in America, as well, people—people want something different. You know, they don't want this—I know, obviously, the franchises and these kinds of things have to be good. Every time you go to one place or another place, whatever it is, but people do like divestiture. They're like, “Hey, I want to check out something totally

different,” right? And in my ten years of being here in Houston, I’ve seen a lot—I’ve seen a lot of—definitely a lot of advancement of—of knowledge about, you know, food. And, you know, I think a lot of it starts in school. I really do believe that it does. And then there are a lot of—I would say, because obviously we have OTC [Offshore Technology Conference], or we have a lot of oil and, you know, technology and—and things like that as well, so I mean that does help, as well. It brings in a lot of people from all around the world, so—.

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And they—and the people that do live around the world, they do know about Indian food, as well, right because, you know, people from China and anywhere near there, they do know about it and they—even Russian people, you know. Russian people didn’t even have any TV there; the only TV they had was Indian Bollywood, and so it’s really weird. When I talked to Russians, they know—they’ll name some of the old Indian actors and stuff like that because they’re the people that they grew up with watching. It’s the weirdest thing. *[Laughs]*

**00:20:07**

**AE:** Well so tell me about the idea that you and your family may have had, like what were your ideas about the American South for you and then for your family when you brought them here?

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**AP:** When I brought them here, basically, it was, you know, to open, like I said, to open up the snack store, you know, and do the snack business and stuff. Along the way, you know, we’ve—we started a bar and grill. In the beginning it—you know, we weren’t—we were not busy but, you know, through—through supporting each other and stuff, you know, and whatever and ups and downs, and like we supported each other through the roller coaster ride, which everybody

told us about—when you go into a restaurant business and, hey, you're trying to go and get a loan from the bank or anywhere like that and you say, oh—and they ask you what it's for and you say restaurant, they just—I mean nobody—no one wants to loan, you know, because it's a high-volatile business. The turnover is very, you know, you could put down payment of 100 grand over here and whatever it is, and you can be gone tomorrow, you know. So pretty much, you know, that's—that's the way it was.

**00:21:05**

**AE:** So is there something about Houston—because we talked also last week about how Houston is such an international city. Was—can you compare kind of the feeling that maybe there might be a difference or no difference between—and I'm going to try not to lead you here, between Dallas and Houston and just kind of what that scene is?

**00:21:21**

**AP:** Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I feel like—I feel the people, definitely in Houston, I think a lot of people are in Houston that don't even know what we have in Houston, you know. We have so many different kinds of areas. I mean, they—they do have different areas even in Dallas, as well, but Dallas—remember Dallas is—Dallas and Fort Worth is huge. It is massive. And when you're traveling around there, it takes a long time, you know. Whereas Houston, I like—I like the way the city is built in Houston. It's—you have a center. You have one highway that goes from north to south and one goes east and west and then diagonal and then—and then they have circles. And it makes very good sense the way it's designed. Dallas is a little bit different. And anybody driving, they will tell you the same thing.

**00:22:02**

So, you know, there are a lot of spots here. There's Chinatown. There's an Indian District. We're in the Mahatma—they've renamed the area and called Mahatma Gandhi District, and then Chinatown is the next exit down towards the Beltway Eight. You know there's—there's Korean; there's a Korean area where there's a bunch of Korean food and things like that. There's, you know, we have a lot of different—we have a lot of different cuisines, you know, and just recently, they've—I've seen a big influx of African food that's come in here now, as well. I've seen at least two or three new restaurants have opened up with African food. So there is—I mean, there's a lot of different stuff coming over. There's—there's—yeah, there's one called Blue Nile and there's—there's a bunch of them. I mean you know Malaysian food is big here. Thai food is massive, although that's been here for a little while. Obviously, Chinese has been here for a long time, as well, but yeah, definitely. There's a lot of diversity and a lot of different restaurants.

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You know my—myself, I mean, if you go to England, if you go to England we don't have any Mexican restaurants, right. I mean they opened a Taco Bell in London, and it didn't even last. They closed it down, you know. Yet when people come from England, they want Taco Bell from here. You know, they love Taco Bell because we don't get it there, you know. But it's one of the things because we don't have that many Spanish people that live there. You know, and so there's no—well Mexicans or anyone, you know, so we don't—that cuisine is not, you know—. So the same thing here, right; the minority is going to be more or less, you know.

**00:23:26**

**AE:** Do you have time to get out and try a lot of these different restaurants? Do you have a favorite?

00:23:31

**AP:** Yeah, I do, you know, I do. And I like—I do like a lot of different restaurants. [*Laughs*] I like Chris Shepherd's restaurant. Definitely. Underbelly is unique, you know, and they do a lot of cool different things there and stuff. I like—I'm a big fan of—I like steak, so I like Papa's Steak House a lot. I like—I like Thai food, and I like Thai Cottage, which is really good, as well, I think. Thai Gourmet is pretty good. Chinese—Chinese is a very touchy—with me. There's a couple of nice restaurants here where the food is very clean and very nice, like the Triple H Chinese Restaurant on the south side on [Interstate] Fort-Five. They have about, maybe four or five locations, I believe, now and their food is very nice there. It's very good; it's very clean and—and stuff. And then there's the—obviously the PF Chang and—and Pei Wei, you know, your Asian bistros and stuff.

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I'm just not—and some—some buffets that I've been to that are good, you know, that are decent or their food is whatever, but I'm not—I kind of stay away sometimes. My stomach is very sensitive, as well, so—. I have to be careful.

00:24:40

**AE:** Well, I want to hopefully talk to your mom, and I'll ask her a lot of more questions about the food, specifically, but could you tell me a little bit about the type of Indian food that you serve here and what's on the menu and some things that stand out?

00:24:54

**AP:** Uh-hm. Yeah, absolutely. So we have—I would say that our forte here, definitely, is probably one of the fortes is we have—we have sizzlers. So basically, like a sizzler would come out on a sizzling platter just like a fajita would like in a Mexican restaurant. So we sell tandoori chicken, which is a—which is chicken on a bone marinated in light yoghurt and light spices and it's—we have to make sure that one is marinated for at least two to three days because we want the marination to really get into the chicken, right. And so, then—then that one is cooked over charcoal in the tandoor [oven], basically.

**00:25:29**

A lot of people—a lot of Indian restaurants, they don't use charcoal. They use gas, right, because it costs—it costs less, right. We use charcoal. And that charcoal flavor comes out in our bread and *naan* [Indian flatbread] and our food and everything, which obviously tastes really good, right? Who doesn't like to barbecue? So, also we have—so we have—we have the chicken on the menu, the tandoori chicken. We do—we have lamb chops, as well. We do wings. Our wings are really good. Our wings are really good, actually. They're actually very healthy because we actually take the skin off each , and then the wings are marinated in cumin, turmeric, and light spices like chili and ginger and stuff, and them ingredients right there are very good for like, they say that's very good for to keep you—cleanse your lymph nodes and keep them at bay or whatever they say. And they're very—they're very good like antioxidants or whatever they're called. So they're very good for you. So I know we have that, and they're thrown in the grill as well in the tandoor, so they're actually even healthy, so they're really good as well. And then we have a masala fish which is really good as well; that's pretty good. That's more of a—like I would say an Indian, like an Indian kind of—Indian flavor, you know, Indian more masala kind of flavor.

**00:26:37**

And then we also have the favorite dishes like chicken tikka masala [British-style curry], which is a true like national British national dish, you know. Fish and chips is not the number one dish now; it's—it's chicken tikka masala now in England. So there's that and then the—we have *saag paneer* [spinach with fresh Indian cheese], which is really good and one of the things I actually—I don't eat it as much now because I'm kind of weaned out of it; I don't—you know, I see it all the time—is actually the goat curry because in England we don't really eat too much goat. As I grew up, we only ate lamb. And the lamb was from New Zealand, and that's what we knew. I didn't know that there was even goat meat out there, right.

**00:27:13**

And so we—we came—when we came here, and as I—like I said, as well, hey we didn't—there's not many Mexican people there so we didn't even know that *cabrito* [goat in Spanish] was even in that cuisine—in the culture, you know. So there was no goat or anything, so I came here and, again, one of my uncles and his friend, they were making goat at his hotel or whatever. You know, they were going to have a little party. So he said, “Oh, you got to try the goat—or the goats.” And me and my mom, we don't mind—we—we were eating red meat at the time, and we still do. My dad didn't eat red meat. But so, we gave it a go, and we tried it. We tried it, and we did not like it. But it was like, oh, no. I'm—it's not something for me and, you know what, it upset my stomach and everything.

**00:27:53**

So—so then we opened the restaurant and didn't have any goat on the menu at all and just did the regular thing that we knew, lamb, and—and then in the back they were messing around one day and trying to cook it. And they tried to cook it, but they took their time in cooking it, and they stewed it, and it was like stewed for three or four hours, slow process, you know, this and that and everything. And then they ate—and they were eating it and said, “Try it.”

And I said, “No, I’m not trying it. There’s no way. I’ve already had a bad experience, and I do not want to try it again.” “No, no, no try it. Try it.” And then my mom tried some, and she said, “Oh, Ajay, it tastes really good. It’s kind of like—.” Well, like when you—when you do it, like when you braise it, I guess, for such a long time or whatever, it’s like barbecuing right, kind of peels off right and then the curry tastes really nice kind of thing.

**00:28:40**

So basically—and I tried it, and I said, “Oh, wow.” I was like, “Wow, this is amazing.” And then I said, “Okay, you know what. Let’s do this. Let’s put it up on the specials-board and, you know, let’s see. Let’s get feedback from the customers. Let’s see how they like it.” But it’s really good because, you know, it’s just something they put the onions in and they do it from scratch, you know, and it takes time and so—. And, you know, we sell a lot of it, so—. It—obviously it does taste good. And so we do sell a lot of goat curry, as well, I would say, definitely.

**00:29:04**

And then the—just the way that goat curry is made, very similarly we have another dish called *hundi* chicken [homestyle curry with chicken on the bone], and that also is a very popular dish and that also is made on the bone. Both of them dishes are made on the bone. The other dishes are—are boneless and obviously, people say that anything that is made on the bone that’s made, you know—stewed a long time and stuff like that, it just tastes better, right, because all the marrow of the bone and everything seeps into the curry, and I mean it’s just really, really good, so—.

**00:29:31**

**AE:** So you're talking about trying something new with the goat. Are there other things, being in an international community like Houston, that have influenced what you serve here, some ingredients or things that your mother has mixed up just being inspired by some things she finds?

**00:29:43**

**AP:** Um, I would say my dad came up with the nachos, so he—it's very simple. He just takes—the way he does it he gets the tortilla chips and then he gets the picante sauce [Mexican salsa], which is very popular and it tastes nice. And I remember back in the day, anybody that comes to America would have—bring picante sauce back to England with them in their suitcase because we don't have any there. And it was very popular. So he'd put that—put some on the nachos and then cheddar cheese, onion, jalapenos and then our chicken *tikka*, which is done in the charcoal of the tandoor, and we cut it up and put it on top, and then we salamander it [broil it in a special oven], and it's really good. It's really popular, actually. And so that's—yeah, that's kind of like a mixed kind of, you know, dish and stuff. And yeah, you know—you know, what it is, I think, is if we brought you a traditional menu from England to come here, people aren't used to it and it doesn't—you know, so it's a lot of trial and error here, as well, here in—in being in America now. We had to do a lot of trial and error as well.

**00:30:42**

Something that really—that may be a really popular item there is not going to be a popular item here. Just like I said, people with goat curry there—not going to buy it because all they know is lamb. But here, we might not sell—not sell that much lamb but we sell a lot of goat curry now, you know, so definitely.

**00:30:58**

**AE:** Well, and that reminds me to ask you about the brownie dessert that you came up with.

**00:31:03**

**AP:** *[Laughs]* Yeah that's—okay, so my—actually my uncle—my uncle from Denver is the one that came up with that. He was here one day, and he was like, “Hey—he's like, “Hey, Ajay, in my travels”—because he travels a lot—he's like, “Hey man, on my travels,” he goes, “I had this thing.” He goes, “And you guys have the Sizzler.” He goes, you know, “This is a badass dessert.” And I said, “Okay.” So then we went and got all the ingredients and got the brownies, got the brownies, got the sizzler [hot platter]—warmed the brownie up a little bit and put it on the sizzler and poured vanilla ice-cream and then poured Hershey's chocolate syrup in a shot glass and then take it to the table and pour the chocolate on top right there in front of the customer. And obviously, the smell is like a bakery, like a chocolate bakery, you know, or whatever and stuff. And so what it does, it entices other people to order that as a dessert. And it's like having—basically, when they eat this—and, you know, it's really good, the combination. And so yeah, he's the one that actually came up with that dish. And then we—we just put it on the specials because I didn't know if it was going to sell or not, so like I said—and we put it on there and then all of the sudden now we sell—we sell—we sell a lot of it. *[Laughs]*

**00:32:04**

**AE:** That's great. Well, because it's so wonderful to me that you have this like commitment to traditional Indian food, and I understand you make your own house-made cheese and things for different—different elements, but then you also—it's like this mash-up with pop culture, you know, American pop culture as it relates to food.

00:32:22

**AP:** Yeah. Exactly, yeah, definitely 100-percent, yeah. It is.

00:32:26

**AE:** Well, let's talk about Chris Shepherd for a minute. You mentioned him earlier and his restaurant Underbelly. And talk about what that's been like to kind of strike up a friendship with him and what—what he learns from y'all and what y'all learn from him.

00:32:39

**AP:** Yeah. He's a—he's a gem of a guy first and foremost. I've known him for—yeah, since I mean—probably, I would say, after—we were open for ten years, but I probably met him after maybe—after being open maybe two or three years. I think we were open like maybe two or three years. And like I said, in the beginning, we weren't that busy. We didn't do any advertising or anything like that, so no one really knew that we were here. So, but yeah. So he came into the restaurant, I remember, and then he invited me to the first restaurant that he was with and that was—what's it called—Catalan [closed in 2011]. So he invited—he invited me. He said, "Hey," you know, "come over there and, you know, check it out and eat and everything." And then, you know, all of the sudden, I just had seen so many customers coming in and saying, "Oh, yeah. We came because, you know, Chris sent us here." You know, or whatever and so you know, he would—he would say to people hey— and he told me, "Hey, your food is phenomenal." You know, "I don't understand," you know, whatever and he said—he goes, "No, I want to—I want to help, you know, help you guys, you know, promote and stuff like that." So they sent them.

00:33:41

So I went to his restaurant Catalan, and I didn't know what foie gras [duck or goose liver] was, that's first of all. And pork belly—never had it before in my life. The seared Ahi tuna I had never had in my life. None of these things, you know, and it sounds really weird, but it's not, you know, because we're not exposed to it growing up or anything.

**00:34:00**

And so I went there and my—I mean I liked all the food there. Everything was really good. I remember the foie gras bon-bons were amazing, like you just—you put the whole thing in your mouth and then you have to bite down on it and the—the foie gras, the cheese—the foie gras cheese kind of emulsion like just coats your mouth. It's like an explosion of flavor in your mouth. It's unbelievable. And then the—the pork bellies, I believe they were Berkshire pork bellies or something and then he had like—like syrup, like cane or whatever syrup or something like that and everything, and then they put it in salamander [oven] a while. That was amazing as well. That was really good. And then the seared Ahi tuna as well was really good.

**00:34:39**

And then I would normally have a main—like a main dish, you know, like a lamb chop or you know steak, like he would make me a steak or whatever. I used to always get my steak well done and then he was like—he'd look at me and be like [*Gestures*] “What's wrong with you?” And I was like, “I don't know. I was—I just want it well done.” And he refused—he refused to make my steak well done. And he made me eat it medium rare. He made me eat it. He came out and said, “No, you have to take a bite.” And that's when I started eating steak medium rare—or medium. I would never go higher than that though, it just—I understand what they say, there's no point eating it because it's like—becomes like rubber. There's no point, you know, kind of flavoring or whatever it is.

**00:35:21**

So yeah, I understood a little bit about that at that point and then with foie gras, you know, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know it was duck liver or goose liver, you know. I had no idea, so—. But yeah, I enjoyed that a lot and stuff, so—.

**00:35:36**

**AE:** And he's come here to—to learn from y'all?

**00:35:40**

**AP:** Yeah. So, many times we've done culinary tours here. We were—I think there was—there was going to be some kind of—we were trying to set up a TV show kind of deal thing, you know, like do a series, and I'd pitch it to a channel company. Because I believe—I had—I had a guy that was doing photography and all that kind of stuff. So I said hey, you know, let's—let's see. Let's try a new one. So he'd come down one day, and we'd put the cooker out, and basically we did a thing where he'd learn how to make the *hundi* chicken. So we'd make it together. And then he'd make it and stuff. And he called my mom—or he called—I like told him, “Oh yeah, this is how—he wanted to make *vindaloo* [curry dish] or something. So I told him, “Oh yeah, you have to get this—you have to make the onion gravy. You have to do this.” Obviously, I don't really know like too much. And then so he made it, and I guess—I don't think it came out right or whatever. And then he just called my mom directly then after that.

**00:36:31**

And then now he just calls my mom directly. If he wants to know something, he just calls her directly now, so then she points him in the right direction. And actually, when we—there was just—recently there was an Off the Dinner series that they were doing at Underbelly and the first of the—it's called Off the Wall—sorry. It was London Sizzler and, actually, the *vindaloo* that

they made that day was amazing. It was really, really good. And the people—I was sitting—that I was sitting down with or whatever, they were the—everybody was talking about it. It was really, really good. So they did a phenomenal—he did—he did a phenomenal job of making that *vindaloo* because he made that dish, and that was something that he was shown, that he's learned from his, you know, friend circle and other people in the community and stuff so yeah, definitely, absolutely, yeah, for sure.

**00:37:15**

**AE:** And what do you think about that kind of sharing in this community? Because there are a lot of people who are just so proprietary and do what they do and nothing else, and what that kind of cross-pollination means for—for y'all?

**00:37:27**

**AP:** You know, somebody—somebody told me—somebody told me best because my dad—my dad—well, I think my dad is a little bit reserved as far as, he's cautious. He doesn't want to tell anybody any kind of ingredients and stuff like that. I know that there's labs where you can send food to, and they can tell you exactly what's in there, right. I mean they're spectra-analyzers and all this kind of stuff, I mean so there's—I mean if someone wants to know something they can find—they can figure it out, and they'll find out what it is.

**00:37:51**

I mean I think it's just—and someone else told—another—somebody told me, you know, one of the—like one of the best Indian restaurants in the world is—is the original Bombay Brasserie or—and I can't remember what it's called. I think it's Bombay Brasserie. But anyway, they have a cookbook. They have a cookbook where every single dish that they make is made—

it's not that—. Hey, if someone makes it from the book, it might not come out exactly the same how they make it in the restaurant. It's a guideline; you're not—you're just saying hey, this is what—this is what goes into it, but hey everyone makes it different, right, at the end of the day.

**00:38:23**

So and that's what it is. So, I don't think—I think it's good to share, definitely, and influence and—and, you know, different—. Hey, they don't know about this or maybe a little different kind of spice or whatever, you know. Like when we boil our rice and stuff we—we you know we put peas and carrots and then, you know, we put like different things in there like in the—in the water when it's—when it's boiling, you know. They're like clove in there, in the water when it's boiling. Then we put a bay leaf in there, you know, and we may put like a little cinnamon stick in there like a little bit—or whatever. And then that's the *pilau* rice [rice cooked in seasoned broth]—that's the aroma that comes off the top, you know, of the rice and stuff, so you know, there's that. We have that and a lot of people do have that as well, so I mean—.

**00:39:02**

And also I went into a business and another project and another restaurant which was opened inside the—the loop which was called Ambrosia, and my partner, he was a chef there as well. He had made *kulfi* [Indian milk ice cream] and he made—we made *kulfi*, as well, but he had made *kulfi* and then we just served regular *kulfi*, so but what he did was he had made a—he'd make a syrup, and in the syrup he'd put saffron and a lot—star anise and I believe lychee, and it's—. And it was so good because some of them—some of them products are overpowering as well, you know. They're—they're too powerful, too potent. And so basically, you know, he had got it just right and the *kulfi* tasted amazing. The first time I tried it, I was like, oh, wow. I was like—I was like hey, I want to sell that at London Sizzler now, you know [*Laughs*] And he's like no, no. He said, “Of course you can, if you want,” you know or whatever.

00:39:59

**AE:** [*Laughs*]

00:40:03

**AP:** Oh, yeah. I've got about five minutes left.

00:40:07

**AE:** Okay. Tell me what your father just delivered.

00:40:10

**AP:** Okay. So we have a lady that works in the back and her name is Berta—Alberta Alvarez—and she brought this cake for Father's Day for my dad. And he's been out of town for the last three days so—and she must have bought the cake for him because I think he likes this cake. And it's, you know what it is? I believe it's just Jell-O. It's just two layers of Jell-O, but they're done differently and that way, you know, it's their traditional—they've got walnuts and stuff in there as well, I think.

00:40:39

**AE:** It looks beautiful. He's nice to share. Well, let me—since we don't have much time, let me go back to the sweet part of the business and talk about the—the snacks and the sweets that y'all have next door.

00:40:48

**AP:** Okay. Yeah, so basically, our snacks that we make there are all homemade, and we don't use machinery and stuff to make them, and we charge a little bit more for that. The quality is very, very good and we've been open for about five or six years. We—we already have our foot in the door. Basically, we sell to—we wholesale it and so we supply the grocery stores, so we supply a market in Dallas, San Antonio, Austin; we're—we're now trying to go into Louisiana, Mississippi, as well as Florida, even as well to get our foot in the door.

**00:41:22**

We do shipping, as well, so if anyone wants the shipping, we can ship it to them as well. And but obviously, then, the snack bags or whatever you want, it's easy to just go to the grocery store and try it and stuff and get it from there. And then we do usually our retail. We have a retail outlet here next door. And then the same thing with the sweets, you know. A lot of the sweets are made with milk. A lot of the snacks are made with lentil flour, potato, and then they're going to have the different—various like stir fries and stuff with them, so—.

**00:41:47**

**AE:** Can you tell me about a couple of the more popular ones?

**00:41:50**

**AP:** Yeah, one of the—our most popular snack is African Chevra [also African Chevdo]. So basically, it's—it's like an Indian trail mix. They have the regular chevra but this one is African Chevra because it tastes—it just tastes better. **[Laughs]** Well actually, what it is—is it has a little bit more spicier. It has like potato chips, like potato chips in there, and it has a little bit more lemon, like a little bit more lemon in there, and I believe it has a little bit more *moong dal*, like which is like whole *moong* [mung bean] and stuff in there. And it just makes it taste a whole lot

better. And that's the way the Africans make their—the Indian Africans made their chura. So over here it's become a popular seller now and everyone just loves that. And then obviously our—our handmade—our handmade *papri gathia*, which Chris, he—he calls it crack because they're addictive. He can't stop eating it. And so they're made out of lentil flour, gram [chickpea] flour, the snacks are and they're like very crispy and like light and fluffy kind of, so—They're the popular ones.

**00:42:52**

**AE:** Well, and I have another question, and then we can end on this, if you'd like, but I wonder how now that you're established here and you've been here ten years—just in this shopping center alone, there's another Indian restaurant right next door. There's the Himalayan Restaurant. How do you compete and how do you—how do you stay competitive?

**00:43:06**

**AP:** So [*Laughs*]  
—so we've been—we have been here ten years, so me and him are not open at the same time. His food is like Pakistani-style food and his restaurant is—it's a little bit different. It's a more café kind of style a little bit, you know, or whatever. And then obviously, over here we're—like we try to make the atmosphere, you know, like as a bar and grill, basically, should be, you know, with the TVs and things like that or whatever, as well.

**00:43:30**

And, like I said, our food is a little bit different from—from his, definitely. It's more British Indian-style food, you know. And then we have another Indian restaurant next door. We have a vegetarian restaurant, which sells Gujarati [of the western Indian state of Gujarat] and South Indian, I would say, like street foods like foods that, you know, they eat in the house and

the street food kind of, vegetarian—they're that strict. And then next door to there, they also have Indian—they also do Indian food. Basically, their food is—their menu is pretty much the same as ours. It's identical and stuff, so the—because it's busy here now in this complex, there's a lot of off-flow, you understand. People don't want to wait an hour for their table or whatever, so they just they'll go and eat somewhere, you know.

**00:44:14**

**AE:** And so I was—I usually end on a question about what your future is, but your future is [you're] about to be married and you're leaving for England in just a couple days.

**00:44:25**

**AP:** Yeah. Yeah, I'm going to go to England for three weeks and to basically plan—you know, plan the wedding and—and those things, and then I'll be coming back. And I'll go back in August again, just for seven days at that point, and get married and then will come back with my wife.

**00:44:41**

**AE:** So is your wife ready to be in the restaurant business in Houston, Texas?

**00:44:45**

**AP:** Yeah. Yeah, she is. She's been—she came already over here for three weeks. She stayed here for three weeks and stuff. She actually really enjoyed it and liked it and stuff. Good thing—good, plus is she enjoys cooking. So that's a good thing, you know. And so she likes washing up as well, you know. **[Laughs]** So yeah, she—she likes it. She'll like it, uh-hm.

**00:45:04**

**AE:** So you and your family anticipate being here for a while more?

**00:45:08**

**AP:** Yeah. Definitely, yeah, we'll be here for another five, then years, for sure, definitely. Yeah, I—you know I love—I love Houston and I love America, so—.

**00:45:20**

**AE:** All right. Well, that's a good ending. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

**00:45:25**

**AP:** Hmm, no. No. Maybe when you're talking to my mom, then maybe I might think of something. [*Laughs*]

**00:45:34**

**AE:** Okay. All right. Well, thank you, I do so much. It's been a lovely visit. I appreciate it.

**00:45:36**

**AP:** Thank you, Amy.

**00:45:39**

**[End Ajay Patel—London Sizzler]**