Lisa and Abhijeet Purakayastha

Khana Indian Grill

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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[*START INTERVIEW*]

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Annemarie A.: All right. Today is March 13. This is a Wednesday, March 13, 2019. This is Annemarie Anderson, recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Fayetteville, Arkansas with the Purakayasthas. Would you guys go ahead and individually introduce yourselves, tell me your name, and what you do?

[00:00:21.09]

Abhijeet P.: Well, I'm Abhijeet, and I started Khana with Lisa in 2015. It's been four years since we started. It's been going very well, so I'm glad about it.

[00:00:35.23]

Annemarie A.: Great. What's your birth date?

[00:00:36.23]

Abhijeet P.: Oh, May 23, [19]62.

[00:00:39:01]

Annemarie A.: Okay, thanks. Would you introduce yourself to the recorder?

[00:00:41.20]

Lisa P.: [Laughter] Hi. Yes, I'm Lisa. I'm Abhijeet's wife. My birthday . . . gosh, I really have to say that? [Laughter] Is May 24, 1958.

[00:00:53.15]

Annemarie A.: Okay, great. Great. Well, let's start off and talk about . . . well, introduce me to you guys. Tell me a little bit about where you're from, like who you are.

[00:01:05.03]

Lisa P.: Sure. Well, Abhijeet and I actually met at an advertising agency, McCann Erickson, in Houston back in 1985. He had just graduated from the University of Texas and joined the firm, and I was already working there. Somehow, we got together and married a year and a half later, and started . . . we both knew that we didn't want to be in advertising, even though Abhijeet had just graduated from school. We both knew that we wanted to do something entrepreneurial. So, at our kitchen table, we started a small company that imported leather goods from India, because the town that he was originally from in India was the leather capital of India, which is Chennai. So, we built that into a business where, first, Abhijeet could leave the advertising agency and then I could leave it, and then we brought his brother in. His brother was still living in India. Abhijeet's the only member of his family that immigrated here following his father's death almost forty years ago. He had an aunt and uncle that were professors at the University of Texas and invited him to come and attend school with them. So, we built our leather company up, and to the level where a factory was built. His brother handled the manufacturing in India, we handled sales and marketing. Finally, our company was big and most of our clients were in Europe. We started seeing a decline in business because we couldn't compete with Chinese manufacturing. It was kind of the rise of all of the Chinese factories and . . .

even though India had a much longer tradition in leather, China could always undercut on price. So, we started looking at other options, and from our visits to Fayetteville—to visit my brother, who'd moved here, I don't know, almost thirty years ago—we got to know this area. And we liked it, and my parents even bought some property here and built a cabin on it. So, in 2006, we were at a wedding in India and I realized that communication was much easier than it had been when we started our leather company. For example, we used to have to drive thirteen miles to send a telex to India to communicate with my brother-in-law.

[00:03:33.08]

Abhijeet P.: Or a fax.

[00:03:33.09]

Lisa P.: Or a fax. So, here we were, using our cell phones in India and communication was all of a sudden, in my mind, easier. And I realized we could live anywhere. We didn't have to live in Houston. We could communicate with our clients and our manufacturing facility easily enough. Plus, my sons were . . . growing up, and . . .

[00:04:01.02]

Abhijeet P.: They needed to be exposed to . . . public education.

[00:04:03.01]

Lisa P.: Yeah.

[00:04:04.29]

Abhijeet P.: Rather than being in a private school.

[00:04:06.12]

Lisa P.: Yeah. So, my parents also had lived in the same house just north of Houston for fifty years, and they wanted to downsize. So, we came back from a wedding in India and said to my parents, "Let's all move to Fayetteville." So, they were on board with it, even though my dad was eighty and my mother was seventy-five. And we all just got busy and we sold our houses and moved up here and bought homes and relocated. It was a challenge at first, but it turned out to be the start of something wonderful for all of us. My older son ended up starting a business here when he was fifteen, and Abhijeet and I continued to see that we needed to do something different than our leather company. So, I think when we first moved here, too, we missed all the ethnic restaurants that were available in Houston. You can get any type of cuisine at any time of day, any day of the week. When we came here, all of a sudden, that was gone. There wasn't even much diversity in grocery stories. So, we had gotten to the point when we were in Houston that we didn't even cook that much, even though our whole family are foodies. We only cooked on special occasions or maybe when we all got together on Sunday. Otherwise, it was just easy to pick up something and be done with it. So, we started thinking, "Well, we're gonna have to cook, and we want to cook Indian food." We started looking for ingredients, and so that was a challenge, too. Finally, through talking to people, we found

a shell station in Rogers, near Northwest Arkansas community college that, on the aisle next to the Fritos and the Cheetos, were some bags of Indian spice mixes and dals and—

[00:06:03.11]

Abhijeet P.: Ready-mades.

[00:06:03.15]

Lisa P.: Ready-made foods. So, we thought, "Okay, at least here are some ingredients." So, we started cooking for ourselves, and then we started inviting people over and got a positive response. Because Abhijeet and I had a lot of flexibility with our schedule, we volunteered for a lot of things. So, we started cooking Indian food for volunteer groups that we were a part of and had a positive response to it. Then finally, one day, I realized, you know, when I was five, my biggest life goal was to be a waitress. I was always the waitress for our family food gatherings, our meals. So, I thought, "You know what? Maybe I'd like to have a restaurant." So, we . . . just step by step, envisioned how that might look. In 2015, we opened Khana Indian Grill, and haven't looked back. So.

[00:07:01.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:07:03.17]

Lisa P.: Mm-hm.

[00:07:05.21]

Annemarie A.: Well, talk a little bit about Houston. We were actually talking about this in the office, like just the sheer diversity of food and how diverse of a city Houston is.

[00:07:15.25]

Lisa P.: Yes, right.

[00:07:15.25]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about the food that you ate there that you guys just really enjoyed, that kind of influenced you or made you think about food in a different way?

[00:07:25.01]

Lisa P.: Well, yes. Houston is just this great cultural . . .

[00:07:34.17]

Abhijeet P.: Mix of . . .

[00:07:34.17]

Lisa P.: Wonderland for anybody who's interested in food. You know? You can get anything from Ethiopian food to, there's a restaurant now called Himalaya that specializes in kind of Nepali, Indian food that's gotten a lot of acclaim lately. I think the chef and owner of that has been nominated for a James Beard Award this year, which is great for just a little

hole in the wall restaurant in kind of the Little India section of Houston. But before I met Abhijeet, I really didn't think I liked Indian food. When his mother arrived for our wedding, she started cooking, and it was very simple food. A *dal*, maybe some sautéed potatoes, something like that, but just the freshness and the . . . new way that she used spices, it was new to me that you wouldn't just go to the grocery store and buy a jar of spices. She actually used whole spices and roasted or toasted them and ground them herself. And just the flavor that resulted from that was a revelation to me. So, she started teaching me to cook. She introduced me to a lot of new foods, too. I remember one day, I came home from work and she was making these patties that she calls *sago wadas*. And they're basically balls of tapioca, which in my mind before was just some ucky, gooey sweet dessert—but balls of tapioca that she'd soaked in yogurt and mixed with potato and green chilis and cumin and peanuts, and then was shaping into patties and frying. It was just so far off of my comfort zone that I said, "No, that's okay, I'm not really hungry." But then she finished them and put this beautiful plate down with some chutney on the side, and I was in love, okay? It was wonderful. She is really the one that started us on this journey. Abhijeet would try to cook a little bit, but again, he grew up with his mother and sisters cooking, and he didn't cook so much on his own. [Laughter] Anyway, but when we were in Houston, our favorite restaurants were a Greek place called Mykonos Island and a Thai place called—

[00:10:03.01]

Abhijeet P.: Kanomwan.

[00:10:03.01]

Lisa P.: Kanomwan. In between, we would go to all different types of cuisine. Of course, there's a ton of Mexican restaurants.

[00:10:11.18]

Abhijeet P.: And Lebanese.

[00:10:11.29]

Lisa P.: Yeah.

[00:10:13.14]

Abhijeet P.: Vietnamese.

[00:10:15.10]

Lisa P.: Yeah, Vietnamese, strong influence on us. My father just passed away in January, but he was a big influence on our family, too, because he was always looking for interesting, out-of-the-way ethnic restaurants in Houston. So, he found the first Vietnamese restaurant that we went to, which was called Kim Son. Anyway, a lot of them were really humble, and some of 'em had found success in Houston. Then they went from a small little hole-in-the-wall to a regular, bonafide restaurant. But anyway, I don't think we . . . probably seventy-five percent of the time that we ate out, it was the small, ethnic restaurant of a variety of different cuisines.

[00:11:04.23]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, talk to me too, a little bit, you were talkin' about moving to Fayetteville and that you had a brother living here. But what was your initial draw of coming here? 'Cause this is a lot different than Houston.

[00:11:16.27]

Lisa P.: Yeah. Just to live a kind of a . . . gentler, slower-paced life. We needed a place where several generations of our family could be comfortable, too, because as I mentioned, my dad was eighty, and then my youngest son was eleven. So, we had a wide range to satisfy, and that's one of the great things about Fayetteville, is it's a good multi-generational place. We all like Fayetteville, but for different reasons. It gives you the room to be who you're going to be, but then you're not that far apart. For example, my parents lived just north of Houston, but it took an hour and a half to get to their house. Here, we could be at their home in fifteen minutes, or be at my brother's house in five minutes. That kind of thing kind of facilitated getting together as a family. It was easier.

[00:12:07.12]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Tell me a little bit, too, you were talkin' about that little kind of convenience store in Rogers.

[00:12:15.27]

Lisa P.: Yes.

[00:12:15.27]

Annemarie A.: Do you remember his name?

[00:12:17.07]

Lisa P.: Mr. Patel is all I remember, and . . . the majority of Indian food stores are owned by Patels for some reason or another. If you go to New York, there's a big chain, multi-unit chain, Patel Brothers. The grocery stores that we shop in in Dallas have Patel attached to it. [Laughter] So, I don't know his first name, but Mr. Patel at the Shell station.

[00:12:43.05]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Tell me, to specify, what year did you guys move to Fayetteville?

[00:12:49.26]

Lisa P.: We moved here in August of 2006.

[00:12:51.05]

Annemarie A.: Okay. So, you've been here quite a bit, then.

[00:12:54.05]

Lisa P.: Yep. We've been here twelve and a half years.

[00:12:56.25]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about—you've talked about your decision, but what was it like? Walk me through the process of opening Khana.

[00:13:06.15]

Lisa P.: Well, it was pretty much a nightmare the last few months before we opened. We'd never had a restaurant before. Abhijeet and I had this entrepreneurial bent, but we also want to experience things. So, we wanted to experience . . . the whole renovation of a building. We love design, so we had ideas about that. We had gone to India and sourced all of our lighting and our furniture and some of our decor. So, we went through that whole process of working with contractors and, originally, our building was built for Wendy's back in the [19]60s. When the Americans with Disabilities Act came into effect in the [19]80s, I guess Wendy's decided it was easier to build a new building across the street, rather than upgrade this building. So, it had been a series—subsequently—a series of kind of diminishing tenants in there. When we got the building, the bathrooms looked like—bathrooms looked like in a gas station in a little town that hadn't been cleaned in forty years, that kind of thing. So, while it had the basic shell of a restaurant, everything had to be re-done. All the plumbing and the electrical work. So, we went through that whole process. And I think that no one can prepare you, what it's like to open a restaurant. We'd heard that before, but we thought, "Hey, we've started our leather company and we built that up. Certainly, we can take this on." But I think it was six months before I could turn into our parking lot without feeling queasy. It was just overwhelming, just the demands of the hours that you're open, and all of a sudden, you have twenty-five people that work for you and you're responsible for their lives, too, not just for yours. It was a very steep

learning curve, and came very quickly. So, now we've all settled in, and things are really good. We have learned how to do it. But we had a lot of learning there in those first months.

[00:15:32.29]

Annemarie A.: I bet. Well, talk to me a little bit—I love the decor inside.

[00:15:37.04]

Lisa P.: Oh, thank you.

[00:15:38.08]

Annemarie A.: It's so thoughtful and so aesthetically pleasing.

[00:15:41.03]

Lisa P.: Oh, thank you.

[00:15:42.12]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about how you chose those things?

[00:15:45.22]

Lisa P.: Yes. Well, we first of all wanted to make it accessible. We knew that there was a lot of confusion about what Indian food is or was at that time. It's pretty much like Italian food was in America the 1950s and [19]60s. It was pretty much spaghetti and meatballs or

pizza; people didn't know much about it. But with new immigrants coming in or people opening restaurants, Italian restaurants from different regions of Italy, peoples' exposure to different regional dishes grew. So, now people know the difference between Northern and Southern Italian food. It's gotten much, much more sophisticated. Well, we knew that in this area especially, we were kind of back in the 1950s of what people knew about Indian food. So, I wanted to make it simple. Often, when you go into an Indian restaurant, you're handed what looks like a book. There's page after page of dishes that you are not familiar with and have never heard of, and then, sometimes it's not very clean. Anyway, we just thought about what we might like to see in a restaurant and what we liked in our favorite restaurants, and we also wanted, too, to be a part of the whatever cultural diversity was here. Because it seemed that we were meeting just a pretty much homogenous group of people, and we hoped to attract more diversity through our doors. So, that's why, on the door, it says, "All Welcome." Okay? It's been wonderful. We made friends with the couple, Ali and Rose, that own Rose Stop in Springdale, and they are from Iran originally. So, they are the kindest, nicest people ever, and we had a birthday party for Rose about six months after we opened. All of a sudden, here was this—huge Iranian community that turned out for it. So, that connected us to that. It connected us to other people that grew up maybe in a rice culture that were . . . either from Afghanistan or Pakistan or even Latin countries.

[00:18:27.17]

Abhijeet P.: Saudi Arabia.

[00:18:27.23]

Lisa P.: Saudi Arabia, Middle Eastern countries that have rice as a staple of their daily diet. Even though our cuisine was not their cuisine, it was similar enough, and it was different, certainly, from anything else that was being offered here. So, we started seeing groups of people. There's—as part of the University of Arkansas, the Middle Eastern Studies has the King Fahd Center, so we were exposed to a group of Saudi Arabian students. So, anyway, it just goes on and on like that, the different overlapping communities that have been through our doors that's so rewarding.

[00:19:07.21]

Abhijeet P.: We've also had some of the students pray out.

[00:19:12.00]

Lisa P.: Yes, yeah. We drove up one day and, actually, it was my brother, who looks like a big redneck, and he was in a truck and he drove up and there was a group of Muslim women praying in our parking lot. So, he was happy to see them and he got out and said hello, but he scared them, because you can imagine in Fayetteville if you're praying on a prayer rug with a hijab on and some redneck comes up to you, you're not really sure of the response. So, I think he managed to—through sign language—convey to them, "Hey, I'm friendly, I'm so glad you're here." So, but anyway, that's the type of experience that we've loved. We want to facilitate that, that sense of, here at—see, I'm gonna cry when I talk about this. [Laughter] But anyway, just here at the table, we can all sit together and have a meal and all be a part of the larger family. So.

[00:20:14.13]

Annemarie A.: That's beautiful.

[00:20:14.22]

Lisa P.: Thanks.

[00:20:16.23]

Annemarie A.: That's really beautiful. Well, I mean, you've given so many really awesome examples of people, but are there any specific regulars you guys have?

[00:20:24.26]

Lisa P.: Yes.

[00:20:26.09]

Annemarie A.: Who you want to talk about, that are always at Khana?

[00:20:30.26]

Lisa P.: We have lots of regulars. What's great is that we have a lot of Indian customers, and that was important, too, because one of the things that I thought we could improve on was the way that Indian food is presented. When I would sometimes go to an Indian restaurant, you know, you see a buffet and it just kind of looks like a sea of brown, gloppy dishes. So, that was important to me, to use—all right. When you're in India, often if you buy

street food, you're given a plate that's made out of a leaf, a real leaf that's been dried, and sometimes they're stitched together. Then we saw plates that were made out of fallen palm leaves, and basically, it's a really low-tech process. Villagers gather the palm leaves, they're taken to a factory—factory is a loose term—a building where they're steam-cleaned and sanitized and pressed into the shape of a plate, and then used as a serving, a disposable serving ware. I love that, and I wanted to create that at our restaurant. So, they're more widely available today, but when we started the restaurant, we had to go to a small town in South India and buy a whole shipping container full of these plates so we would have a supply for the restaurant. What's good about it too is then the city came to us and we started working on a pilot program, composting program, with them because these plates break down so easily. So, we felt good about not contributing to the landfill of Fayetteville by using a lot of sustainable serving ware. Then also, we didn't want to contribute to the caricature of Indians that people sometimes fall back on to decorate their restaurants with—you know, idols or gods or stuff like that. India is a beautiful country and has just such a rich tradition of design and craftsmanship that we, because of our importing business before, we knew how to go to India, buy things, and have it imported here. So, we actually had all of the lighting made in a small town north of Delhi. The tables were made in Rajasthan. The prints that are in there, of all the spices, were done by an American graphic designer who decided that she wanted to follow the trail of chai, or tea, in India. She wrote a book called "Chai Pilgrimage." So, these are original lithographs from her illustrations for her book. I contacted her after I saw her book in an article, and she agreed to sell these to me. So, for the first year that we were open, we actually sold the book until she ran out of copies, and is actually having it reprinted right

now. But anyway, so, that's what's behind the decor of our restaurant. We knew that we wanted a counter service restaurant because we wanted people to feel comfortable, and that's the way people eat now. People are busy, and so it's just easier to come in and have a casual dining experience, rather than tables with waiters and waitresses. Plus, we hope it makes it more affordable, too. So, really, our menu is just a list of kind of the greatest hits of what we like about Indian food, that we thought would be popular with an audience in a small town in a small state in the middle of the United States.

[00:24:33.29]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, talk to me a little bit more about how India and specifically maybe Chennai has influenced your cooking, both I guess in a nostalgic way of understanding food through Mr. Purakayastha's mother and his sisters, but also, I guess in a technical way, as well.

[00:25:02.08]

Lisa P.: Right.

[00:25:02.08]

Abhijeet P.: Well, actually, Indian food is very regional. So, we just took some of the best of what we liked within India, within all the states of India. So, you have both Eastern and Western and Northern and Southern food.

[00:25:15.13]

Lisa P.: Yeah, and if you're an Indian, then you're very aware—and we really don't compete with other Indian restaurants, we compete with individual Indians' memories of what their home kitchen was. Because we're making dishes that every family made at home, too, but they made it maybe a little bit differently than we made it, because their mothers were roasting and grinding spice blends that they used, and everyone customizes those blends based on their palate. But I think that's what's trickled down to me. The complexities of Indian food have certainly influenced what I do now. If I . . . if I cook, I use a lot more spices than I grew up using. I know how to blend them and combine them in different ways now. I use a lot more chilis, green chilis. It's mainly, though, the spices and the—you know what I mean when I say *dals*? I mean the pulses and the lentils.

[00:26:21.21]

Abhijeet P.: Yes. There's also a timing issue, you know? I mean, spices are supposed to be put in at certain times and not all at one time.

[00:26:28.23]

Lisa P.: That's right.

[00:26:30.15]

Abhijeet P.: And that's when they release all their fragrance.

[00:26:33.23]

Lisa P.: Right, because there are dry spice blends and wet spice blends, and then there's a process called tempering, where you actually make your dish and then you sauté the spices in oil and add it at the very last minute. So, those are things that I've adapted to recipes that I do. I grew up eating pot roast on Sundays. Well, now, if I make a roast, I don't make it so much in the way I grew up eating it. I make it more with an Indian mixture of spices that we marinate it in, and then we might cook it the same way, but it has a completely different flavor profile because of that influence.

[00:27:16.01]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, talk to me a little bit, tell me—kind of describe for the recorder what are your dishes? What are the greatest hits of India?

[00:27:27.11]

Lisa P.: Oh, okay. Well, everybody—if you're the least bit interested in Indian food, you've probably heard of chicken tikka masala. And that's actually a British name for a dish that is really just a creamy tomato sauce. Well, we decided to call it chicken tikka masala because it was known by that. It's a cousin of butter chicken or chicken 69. They're all creamy tomato sauces. But we knew that we didn't want—a lot of those sauces in Indian restaurants, contemporary Indian restaurants, have food coloring in them to achieve that deep red flavor. So, we knew that we didn't want to do that, so we developed a wet masala that's very red, spice-influenced, and then we actually use more tomato than most Indian recipes. But again, we wanted the color without that artificial, additive element to it. That's our most popular dish. We also make khati rolls. Abhijeet's cultural heritage is

Bengali, and the cultural capital of the Bengalis is Calcutta. So, around Calcutta, they serve khati rolls, which are a flat bread—called a paratha, kind of a flaky tortilla-ish shaped flatbread—that have a variety of fillings rolled up inside. So, we offer those. And let's see. I also like the street food of India. And there's a lot I don't eat, because I'm just . . . the street scene in India is electrifying and wonderful and horrible, all at the same time. So, I know that whenever I go to India, I'm always asking Abhijeet's sisters to teach me some things I've seen on the street but don't want to actually buy on the street. So, we have two chaats. And chaats—spelled c-h-a-a-t—are appetizers and snacks. And my favorite was papdi chaat, and that's basically these thin crackers, called papads, topped with a mixture of potatoes and cucumber and radishes and chickpeas. Then it has the green and the red chutneys, which are cilantro and tamarind-based, respectively, on top. Then in India, most people like their chaats very wet. In here, we found that Americans liked them drier, so we try to strike a balance in there. But if you're in India, it would have yogurt on it in a big way. So, we put a little bit of yogurt.

[00:30:21.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, talk to me, too—you mentioned, at first, the difficulty when you moved here of finding ingredients that helped you cook Indian food.

[00:30:30.22]

Lisa P.: Right, right.

[00:30:31.08]

Annemarie A.: But what kind of suppliers—are there grocers around here that you shop there to get your supplies? Where do you get your spices and your vegetables?

[00:30:43.21]

Lisa P.: Yes, yes. Well, the first place was the shell station, and then Rehka opened India Plaza. Currently, we do most of our shopping at World Food Mart, with Raja and Bindu. They've got a great selection. They order stuff for us. We . . . of course, get our spices and then we mix them ourselves. So, we don't buy the spice blends that are available there. But everything we make, we make it from local ingredients. We have a produce supplier. We get our chicken from a local supplier. It's part of a bigger group, but the good thing about it is that their meat is also halal. That's important to our Muslim customers, and . . . let's see. We buy our rice at an Asian market. Our rice for our *kheer*, rice pudding, we buy it in an Asian market in Springdale.

[00:31:51.06]

Annemarie A.: Is it Tang's?

[00:31:52.22]

Lisa P.: Yes, yes. I love Tang's and I hope you talk to them. [Laughter] Let's see.

[00:32:04.07]

Abhijeet P.: We also get our ginger from them.

[00:32:05.13]

Lisa P.: Yeah. We also get our ginger from them.

[00:32:07.12]

Abhijeet P.: We get our tomato paste from—

[00:32:09.27]

Lisa P.: Yeah, we get from the Middle Eastern store. That's, we're small enough that we can go around and get the things that we'd like from the different suppliers that are here. I think we just try and keep our eyes open for any new store of any ethnicity that opens up. We try to be there and support them and buy whatever we can from them.

[00:32:34.08]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, what was the challenge of—I mean, it's one thing to cook food at home and have dinner parties, but it's another thing to—

[00:32:47.03]

Lisa P.: Scale it up?

[00:32:47.03]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:32:49.00]

Lisa P.: Yes.

[00:32:50.00]

Annemarie A.: What was the challenge of doing that?

[00:32:51.15]

Lisa P.: That was hard. Especially since we hadn't run a restaurant before. So, actually, when we had the idea to open the restaurant . . . well, let me just change tracks on that. I guess about—we finally got through the renovation work of the restaurant, and we thought, "We can open in another month and a half." So I placed an ad, and it said, "Looking for happy people." So, the response that I got to that was limited. But the first person that responded was an Indian woman named Anjana Mukhopadhyaya, and her husband was here. They'd come to the United States because he was working on his Ph.D. in T-genetics. She could not work for ten years until she got her work permit. So, she had just gotten that, and she'd left a master's program in New Delhi in museum—

[00:33:59.18]

Abhijeet P.: Conservation.

[00:34:00.22]

Lisa P.: Conservation to accompany him to the U.S. So, she applied, and she was so far from the happiest person. She was terrified to be in front of me, applying for this job. And I think I was terrified to be interviewing someone. But somehow, we clicked, and she has been a

great support to me. She and I, and I hired another woman named Robin Riedle, and we just went into the kitchen every day for a month and just started cooking these recipes and honing them. Every day, I would write down the recipe and then, the next day, we'd tweak it and I'd start over again, make additions to the recipe and cross out lines and do that. Then, when we had the recipe we wanted, then—because you have to take into account your equipment, too, because you're cooking on different equipment than you are in your home kitchen. So, when we had the recipe we wanted, then we started scaling it up. We still don't cook it in huge batches, because that takes away that home-cooked taste of it. We certainly cook in a bigger batch than you'd cook at home, but we're not going to ever cook in those big, industrial vats, okay? I knew that I wanted authentic Indian food that was party-sized, maybe. [Laughter] For a pan, but not so big that it became industrial.

[00:35:33.07]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I keep hearing that, this, people who cook and who have food trucks or restaurants, they want authenticity. What does that mean for you guys? What does authentic Indian food mean?

[00:35:46.18]

Lisa P.: It means, again, starting with the spice mixtures. Of course, you have to be adaptive for things that are not exactly the same than you would get in India. For example, our onions here are much bigger and taste a little bit different than the onions in India. The tomatoes

taste different. So, you're making allowances for that, and you're also—we use *tomatillos* here in some of our recipes, which you don't use in India. They add something to—

[00:36:19.00]

Abhijeet P.: And jalapenos.

[00:36:19.06]

Lisa P.: Yeah. Jalapenos are different than the green chilis that you use in India. So, we make accommodation for all those things. But otherwise, we try and make the same recipes and the same type of food that Abhijeet's family made that was taught to us. What we do like to do is present it in a different way. I want it to look aesthetically pleasing, and we don't use the metal or stainless-steel dishes that you often see in India, because the plumbing in our building can't support all that dishwashing. So, the sustainable palm leaf plates are really important. We've customized the presentation to be maybe a bit more of a hybrid American theme, but we hope that once you taste the food, it will taste very authentic. The biggest compliment that we get is when a South Indian comes in and says, "This *sambar* tastes just like it does in Chennai." Which is gratifying to me, because the spice blend is based on the spice blend that Aloka [Gupta], my sister-in-law who lives in Chennai, taught me. So, that kind of thing really makes our day. You know? Some people come in and say, think that it's just a restaurant run by Americans, and they don't see Abhijeet or Anjana or anybody, and they see the presentation being different, and then they make assumptions about that. But really, it's just about the aesthetics of wanting it to look pretty.

[00:37:57.23]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, talk to me a little bit about your day-to-day. What's your day-to-day responsibilities, what's a regular day for you here?

[00:38:07.20]

Lisa P.: Basically, we work seven days a week. The good thing about our children being grown now—our sons are twenty-five and twenty-two now—is that we've kind of narrowed down our world. It's all about running the restaurant and looking ahead to how we might expand. Abhijeet and I, the first year, tried to be here every hour of every day that we were open, and that's just not sustainable. So, pretty much what happens is, Abhijeet comes in around 7:30, and he'll stay here until early afternoon. Then he'll go home, and then three evenings a week, he comes back in the evening. I come in around 10:30, and then I stay till whenever I'm through for the day. Right now, it'll probably be somewhere around 6:30ish, and then I'll stay in the evenings if I'm needed. But that way, we can each be responsible for our own specific set of duties. Abhijeet physically goes around and buys all the food that goes into our restaurant. Let me take that back. We do have two deliveries that comes, but all of the specialty items that I've mentioned earlier, Abhijeet will go and purchase himself. I do all of the scheduling and the payroll, the hiring. I would say the firing, but I try not to fire anybody. That type of thing. So, we just take on just the day-to-day ordinary tasks that go into running a restaurant, and we try to divide those according to whatever we're best adapted to. Abhijeet is very detail-oriented, and he likes the routine of early morning. I start at home, too, earlier, but I'm on the computer

doing things, answering e-mails, seeing if anything has arisen during the night that we need to address the next day.

[00:40:09.29]

Abhijeet P.: Also the social networking, all the social media.

[00:40:15.18]

Lisa P.: Yeah. I do all of our social media stuff, so I'm always looking for ways to . . .

[00:40:20.15]

Abhijeet P.: Enhance them and build the brand, yeah.

[00:40:22.17]

Lisa P.: Yeah, represent our restaurant in a fun and aesthetically pleasing way. Anyway, I keep using that phrase, but Abhijeet and I love design, so we're always interested in what's happening in design in India. Thinking about how we might incorporate that into future restaurants.

[00:40:41.26]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. It reminds me a lot of Chai Pani. You know?

[00:40:40.18]

Lisa P.: Yes.

[00:40:45.27]

Annemarie A.: Reminds me a lot, like it's really graphic like that. It's great. Well, talk a little bit, too—I mean, you've already mentioned that it seems to me, rather than this centering around this South Asian community and you're trying to build something, it's more of like, this is a nexus and that your food is able to connect with lots of people from different backgrounds.

[00:41:10.00]

Lisa P.: Right.

[00:41:11.23]

Annemarie A.: But could you talk a little bit, I guess about that, and if you have any relationships with either other groups, other immigrant groups that have come in, or the South Asian community as well? What can you tell me about that, here in Fayetteville or Northwest Arkansas?

[00:41:32.07]

Lisa P.: Because of Wal-Mart and Sam's Club, there's a huge Indian IT population. Generally, they come for two or three years, and are not permanent residents of this area. So, we have customers—the gratifying thing is that we are able to pull people from Joplin, Missouri. We have several—

[00:42:02.00]

Abhijeet P.: From Fort Smith.

[00:42:02.00]

Lisa P.: Fort Smith, south of here. There are a number of people that live in Siloam Springs that come over, and then farther into Oklahoma, we have one couple that comes all the time from Oklahoma. So . . . again, a lot of Indians really appreciate what we do, but some want a more traditional Indian experience, and there are certainly restaurants in this area that cater to them. But I think where we've been successful is, once an Indian family comes in and they see that our presentation is different, it immediately makes them suspicious about its authenticity. I think that when they actually sit down and taste the food, they realize, "Hey, this tastes exactly like what we're looking for. It just looks different."

[00:42:57.20]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I mean, are there any ways that you try to incorporate holidays, like maybe Diwali or Holi or Eid al-Fitr, any other kind of South Asian holidays, whether they be Hindu or Muslim or Sikh?

[00:43:16.12]

Lisa P.: What we do, in the first year that we were in operation, we had a Diwali evening. We've had different things. I think, right now, we're just focused less on trying to be a specific holiday-driven event to just trying to get consistency or keep consistency and integrity of

the food that we serve every day. That doesn't mean that Anjana and I, in October, usually have our Annapurna Puja, which is our worship to goddess Annapurna, who oversees kitchens and food and cooking. So, Abhijeet's sister gifted me with a beautiful marble Annapurna when we opened the restaurant. So, that is our time to really say, "Thank you" in a public way to her for watching out for and blessing our restaurant. Other than that, we don't promote—we just want to be an everyday restaurant. We don't really promote holidays or special things, because we're just focused, again, on just consistency. We've tried introducing new dishes, and some of them have made it onto our menu, but our kitchen is so small that we don't have a lot of room for experimentation. One thing that we did introduce on Sundays are dosas, which are the crepes made out of a rice lentil fermented batter. The reason why we can do those on Sundays is we don't have to cook our regular chicken tikka masala and our chicken coconut Malai sauces, so we can move that equipment out of the way and put the griddles in that you cook *dosas* on. So, we'd like to expand it to other days, but we're just trying to figure out how we maneuver new equipment in there on other days than Sunday.

[00:45:29.06]

Annemarie A.: Definitely. And I just thought about this, you'd mentioned that all the meat you source is halal. Do you work with any halal butchers in the area?

[00:45:37.21]

Lisa P.: There is one that has just come about. We don't, out in Lowell. Right now—what he really does well is goat meat. We don't serve that yet because we don't think—or we

know that there's not enough demand for it in our restaurant. Because we insist on everything being fresh, very fresh, we've had specials before of lamb, and they've been well-received but not enough to add it to our menu on a regular basis. So, while we enjoy this butcher in our personal life, we don't use him in our professional life for Khana.

[00:46:22.17]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Is that Ali Momani?

[00:46:26.03]

Lisa P.: What is his name—

[00:46:26.03]

Abhijeet P.: I'm not sure, but he's out of Lowell.

[00:46:27.26]

Annemarie A.: The community butcher?

[00:46:29.09]

Abhijeet P.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:46:30.13]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I went and talked to him, too. Well, this is something that I think you guys have touched on, but what do you think that Khana—and since it's been open in

2015—what do you think that its place in the community is? What do you think it gives to the community of Fayetteville as a whole?

[00:46:51.26]

Lisa P.: I think it offers an opportunity for something that's not a chain. Family-owned restaurants are hard in small towns because the economics of them are just hard. When we started this, too, we knew that we were going to do some things that really cut into your bottom line, profit-wise: using the sustainable plates, using the sustainable serving ware. Paying our employees more. Our employees start out, and they make 50% more than minimum wage. We try and increase that, and so, because we too want to expand, we keep really clear books of everything. So, a lot of things that affect your bottom line or are hard to do as a family . . . I'm going into the weeds now talkin' about this. It's just hard for a small restaurant to survive.

[00:48:00.29]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:48:00.29]

Lisa P.: In a small town.

[00:48:03.24]

Abhijeet P.: You need density, you need a lot of people to—

[00:48:07.05]

Lisa P.: Right. And because we're an ethnic cuisine, too, that a lot of people in this region, they've heard of but they haven't experienced before, people are reluctant to come in sometimes. So, the good thing is that we know one of the items that we serve, khati rolls, are accessible to everybody. When we were just starting, our plumber came in and he looked around. I offered him some food, and he said, "No, thank you." After he finished, I just got him some food anyway. So, I looked over at him a few minutes later, and he was licking the foil. I felt a personal sense of success there, and so I said, "It's just chicken and tomato sauce." You know? So, I think our khati rolls are a gateway drug for people to experience Indian food because they're accessible. I think if we can just get people in the door, then I think that they will be happy eating our food, trying our food. We do a lot of explanation about what our menu is. Again, we have a smallish menu. And that's intentional. We don't want to overwhelm people that aren't familiar with all the terms and the names. But we also want to be authentic for people that are familiar.

[00:49:31.26]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And this is kind of winding it down, but—and this doesn't have to be, this question doesn't have to be "What is your five-year plan?" or anything specific, but what do you guys hope to see for the future of Khana and of your business? What do you want to see it grow into?

[00:49:51.14]

Lisa P.: We would like this to become a restaurant that everybody in Fayetteville knows about and is familiar and comfortable with dining at. We still have a long way to go. Some people would never step foot in an Indian restaurant, even today, because they have a pre-conceived notion—just as I did, thirty years ago—about what Indian food is. So, if we can just get you in the door, we think we can make you happy. We'd love for the restaurant to keep going for a long time. I would love to see more Khanas. I don't know if they're going to be in this area because . . . the growth here is tremendous in Northwest Arkansas, and it's just hard to predict where that will take us or enable us to expand. But we're always going to stay small here, we're always going to cook our food in small batches, we're always going to be welcoming and inclusive of anyone that walks through our door. If we can teach you a thing or two about what we're doing, that's icing on the cake. Really, we just want you to come in and have a break from the busy world and your busy day outside. Although Abhijeet and I come from an advertising background, we are pretty much an advertising-free zone. I want it to be tranquil when you come in. I don't think that our minds can turn off reading all the advertising messages around us, so we have effectively just removed them to make it easier for people to relax and enjoy themselves for the few minutes that they're with us.

[00:51:39.20]

Annemarie A.: That's great. My last kind of big question is, I mean, you guys say you have two sons. Is this something you'd like them to continue on? Is this something that you'd like to see be a lasting family business?

[00:51:51.24]

Lisa P.: Well, our sons are doin' their own things. Our older son is a truffle dealer in New York and he has an international food business. That started here in Fayetteville. So, he has already grown his company into a multi-million dollar company in the eight years that he's been in New York. He skipped college to move to New York when he was seventeen, and I . . . dropped him off at his apartment, crying, and that's another story. But anyway, he's been a tremendous success on his own. We've been able to help him from our entrepreneurial background and our food knowledge and things like that, but he's taken it and run with it. Then our younger son is . . . doing really well for himself, too. He works for a Canadian furniture company. Anyway, I think that, while they love coming to our restaurant and playing restaurant when they're here—our younger son still helps us out some, even though he has—[Phone rings] A grown-up job. [Laughter] Anyway, he still helps us out here because he likes to do that. I think that we're going to have to pass it on to family friends rather than our sons because they are off and doing really well in their own professional lives.

[00:53:28.10]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Was there anything we haven't talked about that you guys want to mention? Is there anything that you want to say that you haven't?

[00:53:37.22]

Lisa P.: I would like to encourage people in this area that have a food background in their family, that have some type of ethnic food restaurant, to open their own place. It's a

daunting prospect, from the finances of it. It's been hard for us and complex and complicated. It's hard, and I get that. But I think there is so much that cultural differences, culturally diverse restaurants, can add to a community. They can be meeting places for people; they can really help expose and educate people about other people's lives. That's how we find commonality, is through food. So, the more places that open up, the more things that take the plunge—for example, we decided that we wanted to serve an Indian ice cream called kulfi. We didn't have the place to make it, we didn't know how we were going to do it, and we found a woman in Rogers who has a Mexican ice cream place. So, we've worked with her to develop the recipe, and then decided that we would serve her version of popsicles. So, we have kulfi popsicles, that we provide the cardamom and the saffron and the pistachios to her, and she actually makes them into a popsicle shape because she has the molds and the know-how. So, we like that kind of collaborative effort, kind of cross-cultural collaborative effort. We just like to see anybody that thinks they'd like to have a restaurant do it.

[00:55:35.29]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:55:37.27]

Lisa P.: Yeah.

[00:55:38.19]

Annemarie A.: Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

[00:55:41.04]

Lisa P.: Yeah. Well, thank you.

[*End of interview*]