

HANA GEBRETENSAE
Gojo Ethiopian Café and Restaurant – Nashville, Tennessee

Date: April 14, 2016

Location: Gojo Ethiopian Café and Restaurant – Nashville, Tennessee

Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

Transcription: Deborah Mitchum

Length: 28:31

Project: Nashville's Nolensville Road

Interviewee: Hana Gebretensae

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START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00:00]

Jennifer Justus: Hello. This is Jennifer Justus with the Southern Foodways Alliance and we're at Gojo Ethiopian Café and Restaurant. It's April 14, 2016, and I'm with Hana Gebretensae, and I'm going to let her introduce herself now.

[00:00:18]

Hana Gebretensae: Yes, my name is Hana Gebretensae. I'm the owner of and the manager for Gojo Ethiopian Restaurant. I'm from Ethiopia. I live here in United State for seven years. I born January 21, 1976.

[00:00:44]

JJ: Thank you. Okay, so I'll ask you to start by just saying how you got into this restaurant, how you started to work here and own this place.

[00:00:56]

HG: I love cooking and that was my passion, cooking, and around me and family, or parent or relative, when we get together, and they love how I cook and always ask me why, you know, you don't try cooking business, and luckily this place was for sale in 2013. Someone told me they want to sell this place, I come and talk to them, and something what I love to do, and that's how I start the business and so far it's going really good for us.

[00:01:44]

JJ: So did you eat here before you—or did you know the previous owners, or was it all new to you?

[00:01:52]

HG: Yes, yes, I ate few times here and I know the people, not back home but here. You know, as the Ethiopian community, you know, when you see someone from Ethiopia, I mean, you be friendly and, you know, you get to know them right away. That's the only thing. We don't really know back home, just here in restaurant is where I know them.

[00:02:20]

JJ: Okay, and can you tell me, I'm curious to learn how you learned to cook. I remember you saying before we were recording that it's something that you learned early, so can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:02:32]

HG: Yes, ma'am. The cooking starts back home in a early age. That's something they do, the family, your mom teaches you. Once you get seven or eight years old you sit down and you learn how to peel onion or garlic, which, our Ethiopian food, most of it's vegetable seasoned with garlic and ginger, fresh garlic and ginger, so you learn how to peel it. Yeah, they teach you in an early age and how you carry on is that's your passion, whether you like how, you know, you like cooking food or not, it's your choice if you take it all the way.

[00:03:21]

JJ: Is there someone in particular from when you were younger who really influenced you as far as cooking goes?

[00:03:30]

HG: Yes, my mom, my mom. Everything I know I learn it from my mom. She was a good cook and back home, Africa, when it's holiday people get together, and a lot of people used to come for holiday in our house because how good a cook my mom was.

[00:03:55]

JJ: Was she in the restaurant business or just was a great home cook?

[00:03:59]

HG: Just great home cook, yes, ma'am.

[00:04:01]

JJ: Do you remember the first few things that she taught you to make?

[00:04:06]

HG: The first—The main thing is doro wat. You have to know in our culture. That's something—. Back in the day, when you get married, they test you, your in-laws, they test you if you know how to make doro. We call it "doro wat." That's chicken and egg. Definitely I learn that one the most from her, but the first one is shiro wat. The shiro wat is kind of low price back home and it's day by day people use that shiro wat, and that was the first cook I learn.

[00:04:50]

JJ: So what is that? Can you explain that one to me?

[00:04:54]

HG: That's a chicken pea. It's a chicken pea and it cook with Ethiopian different spice, berbere. There's garlic, like I say, and ginger in it. [Pause] That's it.

[00:05:09]

JJ: Okay. Do you have siblings who also learned to cook with your mother, or how did that work in the family? What was your sort of family role as far as cooking goes?

[00:05:21]

HG: Cooking, yeah, if you have a mother who cook good and learn from her, pretty much the family will, you know, carry on that kind of, you know, the food from your family. Actually my sister work here [*Laughs*] with me so she cook too. Both of us, we cook, but probably she's not as much as I am, I guess, you know. So, we cook together with my sister.

[00:05:54]

JJ: Is your mom around still?

[00:05:57]

HG: No. No.

[00:06:00]

JJ: And then, what about the dish that you said can sometimes be a test when you're maybe going to get married: did you go through that process?

[00:06:10]

HG: No. No, I didn't, because I got married here, so. [*Laughs*] You don't get to get test here in United State because you are free to get married who you want to get married and you don't have that kind of culture or that fall on you. But still I, you know, I have to know, as a community when the people come, when you have some kind of event, they will pay attention to that kind of stuff so, you know, you have to know that's serious for our culture.

[00:06:42]

JJ: An event here that's Ethiopian?

[00:06:45]

HG: Yes, ma'am.

[00:06:46]

JJ: And then what is your clientele like? How does it break down from people from Ethiopia to people from here?

[00:06:57]

HG: You mean here?

[00:06:59]

JJ: In the restaurant.

[00:07:00]

HG: In the restaurant? Here in Gojo about ninety percent is from here, about ten percent is from Ethiopia.

[00:07:13]

JJ: Do you feel like you're able to—? I guess, does it make you feel good to be able to show people from here about your culture?

[00:07:24]

HG: Yes, ma'am, always. That's something keeping me going. Someone is interesting to know about our culture. Our coffee, Ethiopian coffee, is coffee born in Ethiopia. So, I want people to know that, and our food is different colors and different texture, and we have that bread only in Ethiopia. That make me proud. I want people to know. That's something I tell every single day for my customer.

[00:08:03]

JJ: Do you get lots of questions from people?

[00:08:06]

HG: Yes, a lot, every day similar question, about the bread—we have flat, spongy-like, look like pancake—about the coffee, about, you know, all kind of interesting questions.

[00:08:24]

JJ: Do you mind to tell me maybe a couple of your most common questions and then the answers to those? [Pause]

[00:08:36 *Break in recording*]

JJ: So, what is the most common question that you get and what do you say?

[00:08:42]

HG: The most common question is about the coffee. Our coffee is unique because we roast our coffee here. It's green coffee, we bring it from Ethiopia, and we roast it here in front of the customer, and that's something, wow, you know, they are interesting, and we have the ceremony, coffee ceremony, and the incense, it go always with. And we have, we call it buna [*Unintelligible*], that bread or popcorn, it come with the coffee, and that's something I have, you know, I have to explain every single day, and that's the most common question we have here.

[00:09:25]

JJ: Okay. So how did you make your way to Nashville? What brought you to Nashville?

[00:09:32]

HG: I love Nashville. Now when I'm living—. The first time when I come I was passing by Nashville going Kentucky, and I just love Nashville. It's just calm, you know, country-looking. You compare yourself where you come from. So, I think one of the reasons that I like, it's not—. The city now is big but still has that country touch, Nashville.

[00:10:12]

JJ: Do you find that the foods that you cook with here, is it pretty easy to find those here? Are there many similarities at all, I guess any similarities, between your native country and where you are now?

[00:10:29]

HG: No, no. Our food is spicy and most of it's veggie. It's healthy food. We have gluten-free bread. All our food is gluten-free. It's different; it's not that similar. Indian food is a little bit spicy and similar but definitely we have unique kind of food here.

[00:10:55]

JJ: Okay. Do you know much about the history of this restaurant, the people who owned it before? Do you know anything about when it opened and all of that?

[00:11:08]

HG: I can't recall exactly. I know it's over ten years. The owner, the previous owner—which is great cook, very good people—they have a good reputation around Nashville and they grow this business really, really good and pass to us.

[00:11:32]

JJ: What does the name mean?

[00:11:38]

HG: Gojo mean a house. In Ethiopia before modern house like this come we had a gojo. It wasn't in my age. It's still there, but I'm from city, you know, I'm not from the village, so the village still have that gojo. The top is hay, the roof is hay, and it's round. A gojo is a house. It's old, old, house.

[00:12:10]

JJ: Okay. Can you talk about where you did grow up and what age were you when you came here?

[00:12:18]

HG: Yeah, I grow up in Ethiopia and I came as refugee in Memphis, Tennessee. That's the first place I arrive in. I didn't live that much in Memphis, but I start life in Memphis but move in Nashville.

[00:12:44]

JJ: And you say you were on your way to Kentucky. Was that to be with family?

[00:12:48]

HG: Yes. There was family I was visiting.

[00:12:54]

JJ: And then just decided to stay here.

[00:12:57]

HG: Yes, ma'am. Yeah.

[00:12:59]

JJ: Okay. When was that? You might have said already, but just in case.

[00:13:05]

HG: That was—. I pass at the beginning of 2013, but I moved same year. That how much I love Nashville. [Laughs] I decide the same year and I moved the same year, yeah.

[00:13:18]

JJ: Okay. So is this the first time that you've had the food business?

[00:13:23]

HG: Yes. This the first time, yes.

[00:13:26]

JJ: Great. Have the people that you've met here in Nashville influenced you in any way, either personally or in your business?

[00:13:40]

HG: Oh, yes, yeah. Most of my customer, they already adopt kids from Ethiopia, and they've been in Ethiopia, and also they want to keep teaching the kids the Ethiopian food, you know, and I do appreciate that. You know, what they do, bringing the kids here, gives them a good life, and I have a really good connection with, you know, the community that bring kids from Ethiopia.

[00:14:13]

JJ: Okay.

[00:14:15 *Break in recording*]

JJ: Can you tell me the favorite dish of yours that you prepare here?

[00:14:22]

HG: My favorite dish is the meat and veggie combination, which is you get to get a different kind of meat and different kind of vegetables. That's my favorite always. Also spicy. I go to the spicy side because of, you know, my background from Ethiopia, and we love spicy.

[00:14:48]

JJ: Why do you think—? I wonder why that is, that spicy flavors are so popular in Ethiopia.

[00:14:57]

HG: I don't know how the spicy start in Ethiopia, I can't say, but I remember when I was little, like three and four, my dad, he used to cut a little bit and put it in my food and, for all my sister and brothers, that's how we grow up. It seems like we can't live without it now because of that at young age they introduce us to the spicy food.

[00:15:32]

JJ: Was it pepper that he would cut to put in the [food]?

[00:15:36]

HG: Jalapeno. Yes, a jalapeno. [*Laughs*]

[00:15:39]

JJ: Okay. [*Laughs*] So, we were talking about your favorite dish and you said the meat and the vegetables. What kinds of meat? Would it be steak, or goat, or—? What kinds of meat do you prefer?

[00:15:59]

HG: I like the doro wat. That's the Ethiopian, the main dish I was talking about earlier. That's the chicken with the egg. I always like that one. That's my favorite, the main one, and the other one is lamb. It's not spicy but it's really good.

[00:16:23]

JJ: Then what about the most popular? We talked about your favorite but what do you think gets ordered the most here?

[00:16:30]

HG: Lentils. People love spicy. It's spicy and that's a popular one. *Nashville Scene* this week write about our lentils dish. So it was still this week, Thursday, was an article on *Nashville Scene*. So that's the one most people like, also the shuro wat.

[00:16:58]

JJ: Okay. Then can you talk about anything that you might miss about Ethiopian food culture, whether it be the way that people eat in your native country, or the way people shop, or maybe you don't miss anything, but can you talk about that feeling that you might have?

[00:17:25]

HG: The missing is —. When it come to market we have organic. It just come direct from the farm and it's organic, our food. That's the most thing I'm going to miss. Plus the holidays, the events we have, how the neighbor get together, celebrate. That's something you can't find anywhere. I mean, that's the thing you can't find here, I believe. Because of the lifestyle, how busy we are, we can't come together and celebrate, you know, like we used to do.

[00:18:19]

JJ: Are you open seven days a week?

[00:18:22]

HG: Yes, we are open seven days a week, Monday through Sunday.

[00:18:27]

JJ: Monday through Sunday, so that would keep you busy.

[00:18:30]

HG: Yes, ma'am. Yes, I'm busy, and also I'm mom, so [Laughs] I'm busy.

[00:18:36]

JJ: How many children do you have?

[00:18:38]

HG: I have three kids.

[00:18:39]

JJ: And have you started to teach them to cook?

[00:18:43]

HG: My daughter, she's nine. I'm teaching her, not the way we learn, because the times change and you don't respond—. I mean, the time has changed, that's all I can say, and I'm teaching her. She's learning some of Ethiopian food but she don't like Ethiopian food that much.

She like pizza, you know, macaroni and cheese, that kind of food because of her, you know, she born here and grow up and her background is here. I'm trying to teach her Ethiopian food, you know, not like – the way I am, you know. [Laughs]

[00:19:26]

JJ: Well, who knows? She might come back around to it, right?

[00:19:30]

HG: Hopefully. [Laughs] Hopefully. That's my wish, yeah.

[00:19:33]

JJ: What about the other two children? Are they younger?

[00:19:39]

HG: Yes, they are younger, and they are boy, so not that much the cooking. The eating, they eat Ethiopian food okay. Yeah, they're okay. I don't know later if they change, because they still young.

[00:19:55]

JJ: Do you cook at home very often, or do you take food from here home, and then how often—? Yeah, first we'll ask you those.

[00:20:03]

HG: Yes, I cook at home. The reason is we eat much spicier food than we have here, so I cook always home.

[00:20:14]

JJ: So what time do you arrive here?

[00:20:17]

HG: I'm here 9:00. I come 9:00 and I have, you know, they come—. People come before me. My sister, she come before me and, once I took my kids to the school, and I come and check everything, and start cooking, and prepare to open the lunchtime.

[00:20:37]

JJ: And then you'll cook through dinner and then go home and cook?

[00:20:40]

HG: Yes, ma'am. [*Laughs*]

[00:20:41]

JJ: Then what percentage would you say that you eat Ethiopian food or American food, you yourself?

[00:20:52]

HG: Myself, [*Laughs*] when I came this country, I used to eat every day American food, but now somehow I'm going back and start eating from breakfast to dinner just Ethiopian food. When I go out restaurant—sometimes I do go out with my kids and husband—I do eat, you know, American food. Other than that I just eat Ethiopian food every day.

[00:21:24]

JJ: Well when you first came here and you were eating a lot of American food what did you like? What were you eating at that time?

[00:21:33]

HG: Oh, chicken burger, pizza, which my favorite was pizza. That's the only—. Subway. Yeah, Subway, those kind of food, yeah.

[00:21:47]

JJ: Well, this area being very international, are there other cuisines from different countries that are interesting to you?

[00:21:56]

HG: Mexican food. Yeah, I like Mexican food because of, I believe, the spicy I think is the—. Yeah, Mexican. I prefer Mexican food, yeah.

[00:22:08]

JJ: Another thing that was interesting to me about what you were just talking about, so you would teach your daughter to cook, so is it culturally that the men don't learn to cook as much as the women?

[00:22:21]

HG: Yes. It depend. It depend your house. My mom, she teach the boys too. It's not common in Ethiopia. They don't cook. The men don't cook in Ethiopia. My dad, he used to cook. It depend how your family teach you, and my dad, he was a great cook. He used to cook, and my brothers, they cook really good. But when you see it in general in Ethiopia, the men, they don't cook. So I think that's the reason and, plus, they are young. When they grow up and if they are interesting to it I will teach them, definitely.

[00:23:06]

JJ: Okay. Do your brothers live here?

[00:23:10]

HG: Yes, yes. My brother, he live here, and sometimes he come cook, yeah, when I need help. Because of the restaurant business, sometimes you will have a lot of people, more than you can handle, and that time I do call for help, you know, call him, "I need help. I have more than expect," and he come help me. Yeah, he cook good.

[00:23:37]

JJ: What have you found most rewarding about running this restaurant and what have you found most difficult?

[00:23:47]

HG: Let me talk about the reward part. Seeing different people, interesting people, you know, very, I mean very, very good people every day. Talking to interesting thing. Like I say, I talk about the food, I talk about the—. So, always I will see someone new and someone interesting to know what is our culture, what do we have in Ethiopia. And when it come to the difficult about restaurant, is the hard work, and you have to put long hour, and you have to make sure —. You have to take to yourself as a customer. When you go somewhere, what do you like to have: good customer service, good food that people rely [on]. You have to think, “I’m going to go Gojo and have a good time.” You know, you have to give that to customer.

[00:24:57]

JJ: Okay. One thing that we didn’t talk about, can you tell me just a little bit more about your family history? I’m curious what your mother and father did for work and also how many siblings you had and what businesses they’re in.

[00:25:21]

HG: Yeah, we are a large family, about nine kids. Yeah. My dad, he was electrical engineer, and my mom, she’s just a home-staying mom. She cook and take care of the family. My sister and brothers, I have one sister here and one brother and the rest is back home. Also my dad is back home. They grow [up] and, you know, the girls is get married, and the boys, most of them is, you know, driver and, you know, that kind of, and I have a brother that has same job like my dad. He’s not engineer but he’s electrician. My sisters, they just married and, you know,

stayed home and raising kids. But here I have one brother, he's married and he has two kids, and my sister also, she's married but she don't have a baby yet.

[00:26:40]

JJ: Did your mother learn to cook from her mother?

[00:26:44]

HG: Yes, yes. They are well-known in my mom's side. I mean, back always my mom, she sit down, love to talk about that, how great cook they are, how they pass into, you know, to family to family. You see, back home, people know each other, so they know who you are and how good cook you are. You know, because of the get-together and the holiday, they share in the happiness together and, yeah, it's a good family history, cook.

[00:27:30]

JJ: And then do you get back home, or do you go back home very often?

[00:27:35]

HG: No, once. Yeah, I went back home only once, yeah.

[00:27:41]

JJ: Okay. Then, last question is, in the time that you've been here, do you feel like you've seen Nashville change, through the restaurant?

[00:27:51]

HG: Yes, yes. Nashville has changed. I mean, it's not that long, but it's a fast change that make you surprise, since the beginning of 2013, and here we are 2016. It's changing a lot.

[00:28:10]

JJ: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time today.

[00:28:15]

HG: Thank you.

[00:28:31]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: June 12, 2016