

JAVANEH HEMMAT
Hummus Chick – Nashville, TN

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START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00:00]

Jennifer Justus: This is Jennifer Justus with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's February 15, 2016, and we are at Casa Azafrán Community Center, and I'm with Java. I'm going to let her introduce herself.

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Javaneh Hemmat: My name is Javaneh Hemmat.

[00:00:18]

JJ: And your date of birth?

[00:00:21]

JH: June 10, 1978.

[00:00:23]

JJ: Thank you. So, how did you get to Nashville and when did you arrive here?

[00:00:32]

JH: I came to United States in 1998 to attend university and I went to MTSU in Murfreesboro. After I graduated the most convenient move and most affordable move was for me to move thirteen minutes away, which was in Nashville.

[00:00:53]

JJ: Okay. And how did you decide on—? Where did you move from? We'll start there.

[00:01:00]

JH: I moved from United Arab Emirates. I was born to Persian parents in UAE and when I was growing up I was very passionate about international travel and pop culture, of course, and through the magic of Hollywood I was very drawn to the American culture. So, when it was time for me to go to college United States was my first choice.

[00:01:27]

JJ: Can you talk about growing up? Where did you live and how did this—? You're talking about traveling and American culture. How did that all come into your life?

[00:01:41]

JH: I was very lucky – now that I think back – very lucky to have been born in United Arab Emirates. The country was six years old when I was born. *[Pauses]* The country was just barren desert. I have pictures of when I was a child where all around there's just sand dunes, endless sand dunes. Through growing up I had great parents who exposed my sister and I to traveling to Europe in the summertime and eventually going to school in Switzerland for a couple of years. So, there was a lot of exposure to different cultures and the diversity of different traditions and languages, and food especially, and as UAE was forming the community population were from so many different countries. There were people from the Mediterranean, Europe, the States, Africa, so in a classroom, for example, all through elementary and high school, there were at least fifteen or sixteen different countries represented in one single classroom, and it wasn't just one classroom but throughout all the schools. When you walked into a supermarket just within walking a few feet you could hear six or seven languages spoken, or the markets, or, you know, going to the cinema.

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So, I understood in my mind that anywhere you go in life there are people of different countries all around you, and I was a little bit surprised that, when I came to the United States, especially in the South, it was more, you know, only speaking one language, and I had to become well-versed in English so I could communicate and ultimately fit in, especially as a college student. But I keep reflecting on those experiences and it's so funny: I moved three continents away to really fall in love with my own culture. So when I arrived here, I, along with having the lack of diversity in language, I also didn't find foods from my country, so I had to learn how to cook on my own, which became one of the most interesting, therapeutic ways for me to introduce myself to the community and my friends. I actually became popular because now I was a person that was offering food, but also to take a closer or deeper look in the history of how our food was formed.

[00:04:30]

JJ: So, growing up, did your family cook at home a lot?

[00:04:40]

JH: Absolutely. My mother cooked every single day and the way that our culture was set up is you eat at home. If there's a really special occasion, you went out. [But our] method of eating and cooking is, you know, food grows, you sort of gather it from the land, you clean it, you add maybe a little heat, and then you serve it on a plate, so it's a very simple transition. I remember my mom would take me to farmers' markets and there would be—. We lived by the ocean so there would be fresh fish still flapping around because it was just caught a few hours ago. I mean, you could just smell fresh parsley because it was just freshly cut, or bright radishes. Everything was just harvested or caught just within a few hours, and that's how really a lot of people ate. Obviously now, with the growth of the country and serving more food to people,

there's the convenience of eating out and different options of restaurants which is, I think, great because the social aspect is definitely growing.

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But, yeah, even until today I love creating my own food. I love to cook my own food. Sort of putting the effort into creating my meals is part of my daily routine.

[00:06:03]

JJ: When you think back, what are some of your favorite meals from home?

[00:06:08]

JH: Oh, wow. My mom, she's an amazing Persian cook, and she makes amazing stews that incorporate eggplants, and beef, and tomatoes, and just very simple ingredients that unite and bring great flavors. In the Persian culture we incorporate saffron and spices in a lot of our food so the aroma was always filling the home. And then of course fruit. Midday, around 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon, we always had fruit and some tea. I grew up in a city called Al Ain, which is a date-bearing city. It's actually a little oasis. So, we had dates around fruit time and teatime. I miss my mom's cooking, actually. *[Laughs]* It's really yummy.

[00:07:10]

JJ: Well, and I know, because we've talked before, that you had a cookbook that she—. I don't know if she sent it with you or she sent it later, but it had a recipe in there for a saffron pudding.

[00:07:21]

JH: Yeah!

[00:07:21]

JJ: So, will you talk a little bit about that?

[00:07:23]

JH: Absolutely. So, when I came to the States—and, like I said, I was learning how to—. I taught myself how to cook. My mom sent me a very traditional cookbook by a famous Persian chef named Roza Mantazemi, and I basically would read these recipes and one of my favorite recipes in there is Sholeh Zard, which is a saffron rice pudding, so it's got soft and colorful textures and really, really aromatic.

[00:08:02]

JJ: So that's the one you looked to when you first got the book and worked on a lot, or did you work through the book, and can you tell me a little more about the author also?

[00:08:17]

JH: When I got the book I really—. The book is very dense, it's very detailed, and it has European recipes, French recipes, as well as Persian recipes. My first initial interest was to go to the Persian section because that's what I was most familiar with and, you know, I've worked through it. There's so many recipes I still haven't tried. I've concocted a lot of different recipes as time has passed. I know the chef was sort of the equivalent of Julia Child. That would be the best way to compare and relate to.

[00:09:06]

JJ: Okay. And did that influence your decision to start your company, or how did your company come to be? I'll let you tell the name of it and all that.

[00:09:17]

JH: So, my company, Hummus Chick, is a Mediterranean food company, and the reason Hummus Chick began was out of the necessity of finding fresh Mediterranean foods that I

couldn't find in the marketplace. When I learned how to cook it was strictly a survival method for me so I could nourish my body with foods that I knew would serve me well.

[00:09:48]

So, I graduated from college and I entered the corporate world but something within me—. I had an inkling that kept going back to the recipe-building and following the heritage and the history of hummus-making. So as time kept going by, it's just amazing how nature took its own course. I got laid off from a job and I went back to school for chemistry, and even though a lot of people don't understand this, but chemistry plays such a strong role in cooking. I did almost set the lab on fire three times. It was a [disaster.] I was actually banned from touching any more gas knobs. But I did learn so many fundamentals on how to incorporate chemistry into cooking, such as temperature and timing and so on.

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While I was in school I went on a trip to California to learn how to surf, and while I was on the surfing board I was sitting in the middle of the ocean, waiting for a wave, and it just hit me. I was like, "This is it. I need to follow my heart and start my own food company," and the name "Hummus Chick," I was like, "This is it. I'm going to create a hummus company." So I came back from the trip and I only had thirty-five dollars left in my pocket and I spent thirty dollars on a business license. I had five dollars left for a few simple ingredients and I made six units of hummus and I sold them all to friends and family. Right after that I connected with the farmers' market community and we just hit the ground running. I had no idea the reception was going to be so warm and welcome and I just learned so much about product development, recipe-building, customer feedback, and I couldn't have done it without our customers. I learned so many lessons. So, now it's been about three and a half years, and we're in so many different

stores around the city and I'm so excited about 2016 and '17 on expanding to a south, regional market.

[00:12:05]

JJ: Okay. So, back to your job after college: what was that field before you went back to school for chemistry?

[00:12:19]

JH: My job was in business management for a car rental company, which—. My job was business management in the corporate industry, which was a reflection of my degree. My first degree was in business management.

[00:12:40]

JJ: Okay. So, Hummus Chick: was it partly to fill a gap that you think was here in Nashville, as far as good, fresh Mediterranean food?

[00:12:52]

JH: I think ultimately it did become that, but, to be completely honest, it was a passion-driven idea. I didn't really worry about—. I knew it didn't exist, I knew my ideas weren't the flavors that I was experiencing, and as I was working in the corporate world I didn't have enough time to prepare food, so sort of the time prep for me was something that I always struggled with. So, when I got laid off and I had time to really take care of myself, I really did see a difference in the way I was eating and I thought to myself, "This would be awesome to provide for other people," so it really became a humanistic need. Then when I came into the market I realized there's really not much like it, and not even—. I held myself more accountable to creating a great quality because, as an introduction of a new product, it was important for me to educate and advocate the best that I can.

[00:14:00]

JJ: Do you have any stories that you would want to share about—since you've been running the business—of food helping teach people things and show where you come from, or maybe any sort of breakthrough moment or favorite moment that you've had since you've been in business?

[00:14:23]

JJ: I've had so many amazing experiences since being in business. I thought when I came into this realm I would sort of like have my head down, make my hummus, and sell it. I had no idea what a wonderful community of makers, eaters, [*Laughs*] mothers, dads, that want something really fast for their kids. I did not know what a beautiful story this was going to become.

[00:15:00]

I'm very lucky to be working in Mesa Komal, which is a nonprofit kitchen in Casa Azafrán, and we're surrounded by so many different cultures, so many different food ideas. We have a baby food company; we have bakers, caterers, food trucks; we have cheesemakers. Every single one of us has a unique story, and the best part is we network together; we help each other with resources. So, it has really helped all of us become more well-rounded food entrepreneurs but also learn how to connect with our customers.

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My product, I'm learning every single day that there are some people that, for example, can't have nuts, or it's a great vehicle to help people that are on the go. It's a great product for vegans and vegetarians. So, before coming into the market, I had no idea that I was really solving

a problem. I always go back to how this was a very passionate-driven idea and I'm very, very happy that it's also solving a problem.

[00:16:28]

JJ: Well, talking about the different cultures in the kitchen here, I remember Renata Soto, one of the founders of this place, she told a story about walking through the kitchen and someone was teaching Farsi to someone else. Were you involved in that whole thing? *[Laughs]*

[00:16:46]

JH: Yes. We had a white board and we had—. I was getting ready to teach a class, a Persian cooking class, and on the board I was writing the chemical formula to saffron. It was like this silly, you know, diagram and all the elements in there. One of my colleagues was a baker [and she wondered], "What are all these squiggles?" and I was like, "Oh, this is not a squiggle. Let me show you how Farsi is written." So we were, you know, showing her how to write "mama," which means "mom," or "baba," which are very simple letters that are repetitive, and, yeah, Renata walked in and she was like, "What is going on in here? It's cooking and learning languages," so, it's really fun.

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JJ: How many languages do you speak?

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JH: On varying levels I've studied seven. My first language was Farsi—I spoke Farsi at home with my parents—and then Arabic. English is my third language, and then I studied French, Spanish, Italian, and German.

[00:17:55]

JJ: Wow. Let's see. What else here? Oh, can you talk to me a little bit about—? You know, you talked about growing up, it was culturally diverse also; so what were meals like in school for you? Was it—I guess just talk about that a little bit, if you don't mind.

[00:18:18]

JH: We had two recesses, or we had a recess and a lunchtime. So, our first recess there was a French bakery that would deliver croissants, and they would be filled with cheese or chocolate or Za'atar, and then for lunch we would have like hummus and some pita bread, *[Laughs]* or like spinach pies, meat pies. It's so funny because somebody once asked me, "What did you eat in high school?" and I would tell them, "Spinach pies," and they're like, "Oh, that's so interesting, because we had Sloppy Joes." So, it was very funny to see what we ate at home is also what we sort of ate in schools. A lot of times, you know, we packed our own lunches, but the school did have a food program where it was very similar to the national food culture.

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JJ: What were your impressions, when you came here, of American food? Well, I guess what were your impressions of American food before you came here, and then what were they when you got here?

[00:19:25]

JH: Before I came here and settled as a college student I had traveled here, so I was a little familiar with the way a plate is constructed. My mom did warn me, before I came here, "You need to learn to cook because once you go there you can't depend on Taco Bell and fast food," and I sort of ignored the warning, but when I came here, you know, cafeteria food in the dorms, it just—. It was just a very interesting experience, because my body was telling me, "I need more nourishment." So, my natural instinct sort of guided me onto how to choose my own

food. I knew what I was getting into, so I wasn't really surprised, but I was just a little surprised that my classmates or friends ate like this as they grew up. I didn't know—. I was a little confused about how the health would have played a role with that kind of a diet, because the dorm food was just—. You know, it was just cheap and fast.

[00:20:40]

JJ: So when did you start to cook for friends? Was that in college or after college?

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JH: It was in college. I bought a little food processor and the first recipe I learned to make was hummus, and as I was making it I really learned the history of why hummus ever existed, in what countries they started eating hummus, and how, sort of like coffee and chocolate, how it traveled through the Mediterranean countries and now to the West, and how it became sort of a survival food. Because it's so dense, people that would travel through the desert, they would caravan and they would have hummus with them, so when they would take just a few bites it would help them to remain full, it would give them energy. So now it's so funny that thousands of years later we're using it as a snack and it's healthy for us.

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So that was my first recipe and it was in college, and of course I never knew portion control and I had roommates so that became an automatic sharing, and I realize that, when you share food, it even tastes a little better. That became our thing. So, I would cook, we would all eat together, we would have more friends come over, and it just became a social event for us: Javaneh would cook and all of us are going over to have a Persian meal, or a Mediterranean meal.

[00:22:12]

JJ: I just remembered that I think you told me a story about maybe Disney World, or your first experience here, or maybe only? Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:22:22]

JH: Sure. The first time I came to the States I was four years old and I was so amazed by all the colors, you know, women wearing shorts, and blonde hair, and, again, coming from a barren desert and then seeing these robust colors everywhere, and big stuffed animals, I mean, who doesn't want to move here when they grow up? [*Laughs*] I was in paradise, basically.

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JJ: And that was at Disney specifically?

[00:22:51]

JH: Disney World, yeah, in Florida. Yeah, I remember we flew in and a few days later we went to Disney World, and it was like: Boom! Here we are, America! [*Laughs*] Mickey Mouse walking around. It was really cool, yeah.

[00:23:07]

JJ: So did your parents say to you, "This isn't everywhere," or were you aware of that?

[00:23:13]

JH: My parents always allowed me to have my own imagination. They grew up in Iran so they were always exposed to a—. You know, back in the '50s and '60s, they were exposed to a more liberated life. But, on that same trip, we also went to Austria and Germany and I remember—this was around four or five—seeing these historical buildings and thinking, "Oh, we don't have that where we live." But through allowing our minds to sort of wander where it wants to be, our parents never really limited that.

[00:23:54]

JJ: Why is that? Why do you think that they let you have that sort of imagination? Were they—? What field were they in?

[00:24:05]

JH: My mom is a homemaker. My dad owns a stainless steel workshop. He invents tools to help organizations solve whatever problem they have. They didn't—because I think they always allowed us to become the people that we wanted to become, instead of sort of saying no to this, or, "This is the only way," they sort of just let us think and absorb our environment and come up with our own ideas.

[00:24:41]

JJ: How did they feel about you wanting to come here for school, and then how did they feel about your business?

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JH: They were—. I mean, you know, I was the first child that left home, so there was a little bit of a worry, but I think ultimately they knew the opportunity to coming here. In the mid-to-late '90s UAE did not have a very strong university program so a lot of the students were leaving UAE to come to the States or Europe to get their college education. Now, of course, UAE has a very diverse college program.

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So, they were very excited about me coming here, a little nervous, but it worked out. But when I started my hummus company they were a little surprised. Imagine this: imagine you tell your parents you're going to move to India to start a mashed potato company. I mean, that's—

[Laughs] They were like, "What? Hummus? Why?" But now they're super excited about it and they hold me accountable to my goals. Every Sunday we talk on the phone, and my dad follows

up with my goals and expects me to reach for the stars, and it's really become a family conversation.

[00:26:07]

JJ: How many brothers and sisters, or how many siblings do you have?

[00:26:12]

JH: I have two sisters. Shekufa is a year younger than me, and then we have a little sister, her name is Nahal, she's twenty-two. By the way, Javaneh means "sprout," or "young," "youth," and then Shekufa means "blossom," and then Nahal means "fruit tree," so there's a garden theme. Again, coming from the desert we yearn for gardens and plants, so [*Laughs*] there's a garden theme.

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JJ: Where do they live?

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JH: My sister, Shekufa, lives in Miami, and Nahal lives back home with my mom and dad.

[00:26:49]

JJ: Do you go back home very often?

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JH: I just became an American last June and I am very excited to have—. The first chance I get to go home would be when Hummus Chick is in a steady place where I don't have to be available every day and my team can take care of a lot of things. But the last time I was there was in 2012.

[00:27:14]

JJ: Can you talk a little bit about the process of becoming an American? What was that like for you?

[00:27:19]

JH: I've always wanted to be an American. When I came to the States as a student my visa was an F-1. I'm sorry. *[Pauses]* I came as a student-. *[Pauses]*

[00:27:39]

JJ: It's okay.

[00:27:40]

JH: *[Laughs]*

[00:27:41]

JJ: Think it through, and no big deal. *[Laughs]*

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JH: I was always very excited to pursue becoming an American. I came to the United States with a student visa, and then my visa transferred to an F-1, which was a working visa, and after I got laid off the visa got cancelled and therefore I had to start the process all over again, and I [sought] asylum. It took about five years of waiting as an immigrant to apply for an American citizenship, and I actually went through Justice for Our Neighbors, another amazing organization within Conexion Americas, or Casa Azafrán, and their office is literally three steps from the kitchen [where] I make my hummus and they helped me with all the paperwork. We applied on November 15 of 2014 and I became an American on June 18, 2015, so the wait was less than nine months. Amazing how fast everything worked. But from the beginning of the journey until I became an American it took seventeen years.

[00:29:05]

JJ: Wow. Let's take a quick break.

[00:29:12]

JH: Okay.

[00:29:14 *Break in recording*]

JJ: Okay. So, can we go back to when you first came to Middle Tennessee State University, and how did you choose that college, and how old were you?

[00:00:13]

JH: It really happened by luck. I came to college when I was twenty years old and I chose MTSU really—. I mean, I opened the big college book. Do you know what I'm talking about? It was like a big, like Yellow Pages times three, a bunch of names of colleges, and I was targeting colleges in Tennessee because I had an uncle that lived around Chattanooga and my parents sort of felt best if I knew somebody [*Laughs*] that would sort of live—I would be somewhere close to that. So, MTSU was one of those options, and the process of getting in was very simple, aside from the visa, but the college application itself, very simple.

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A lot of my classmates, you know, they didn't have to go through the SATs, or they didn't have to have a high school diploma, because in the English standard of education you go to high school or secondary education till tenth grade and then you have O levels and A levels, which sort of take you to a program-based or skill- or trade-based university. So, I took the American version, so therefore I came here when I was twenty, and it was the best decision ever.

[00:01:48]

JJ: Do you remember that first day, very first impressions, and how did you feel? Were you nervous, were you excited, everything?

[00:01:57]

JH: I knew that I was going to be—. I just like jumped into it. Now that I look back I'm thinking to myself, "What a courageous person I was!" I mean, I was totally on my own. But, yeah, so the first day of school I went to this orientation class [for] international students, and so there were students from China, Japan, Nicaragua. I remember the program director walked in with a big box of Krispy Kreme and she opened it and she says, "Welcome to America!" [Laughs] I'll never forget. Every time I drive by Krispy Kreme I just remember feeling so welcomed with these, you know, [Laughs] light sweet treats. [Laughs]

[00:02:43]

JJ: What did you think? Had you had a Krispy Kreme doughnut before? What did you think of it?

[00:02:48]

JH: It was awesome. Yeah. They served it with orange juice. It was so yummy, yeah. [Laughs]

[00:02:54]

JJ: And now, if you can tell me a little more about what's happening with your business now, what changes have you made in the last little bit to move forward?

[00:03:07]

JH: As the company grows I know that one part of our vision and our core beliefs is to have an impact on others. So, hiring the right people who have very similar core values as I do is important, and today I have Michael working with me. He's deaf and I do not know how to sign. He's very patient with me and he teaches me along the way. But he has one of the strongest work ethics I've ever come across, and very happy. When we work together it's all about high-fives

and smiles, and I make a lot of mistakes, obviously, and he catches me and he holds me accountable to that, so it's really, really—. I'm very excited to have him on my team.

[00:04:02]

Our leading product is hummus, and as we're learning more about the Mediterranean cuisine in the marketplace I'm finding that the convenience of cooking at home is something that I can fill the gap, so we're developing a Mediterranean spice line which incorporates countries in the Mediterranean from North Africa through Middle East and Europe. So, we have Ras el Hanout, which, you know, a busy mom that comes home and she wants to make a healthy meal for her family, she needs some protein or vegetables and all she has to do is sprinkle some of our spices and roast it or sear it, grill it, and dinner is done. We want to bring that aspect of cooking at home back into this culture, so we're very excited, and my favorite part about this new product line is we're going to partner with an organization called Heifer (International) where we contribute a percentage of our sales to families around the world to empower them, help them get out of poverty, and take care of their families.

[00:05:20]

JJ: Great. So, [*Pauses*] last question: do you feel like Nashville has—? How have you seen Nashville change since you've been here, especially in terms of diversity?

[00:05:37]

JH: I'm so proud of Nashville. When I moved here from college it was 2003, and now it's been thirteen years and it's just becoming so colorful with so many different cultures. The food movement is so beautiful and delicious and the new ideas that are coming just keep surprising us. It's the best time, I feel, for food entrepreneurs to be in Nashville. There's a huge

need for it and there's so much room, so much room for growth, and I couldn't have imagined being in any other city.

[00:06:18]

JJ: Well, I just want to thank you for your time, and—. Yeah, thank you.

[00:06:25]

JH: Thank you. This was so much fun. [*Laughs*]

[00:06:27 *End of transcript*]

[00:06:42]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: May 31, 2016