



**Sam Nakos
Demetri's BBQ
Birmingham, Alabama**

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Interviewer: Eric Velasco
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[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am conducting an oral history interview with Sam Nakos. It is February 1st, 2017. We are sitting in the office at Demetri’s, where Sam is the second generation to run the barbecue restaurant. It is located in Homewood, a Birmingham suburb.

Please introduce yourself, Mr. Nakos. If you would, please, also spell your name and give us your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:28]

Sam Nakos: Sam Nakos, N-a-k-o-s. My birthday is 11/14/59. Please don’t tell anybody I’m that old. And I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. My father was born in Corfu, Greece.

[00:00:42]

Eric Velasco: That’s the first area I was going to get into. Sorry about the butchering of your last name, Mr. Nakos.

[00:00:46]

Sam Nakos: That’s okay. No. You actually pronounced it the correct Greek way. In America we do “Nay-kos,” but over there they say “Nah-kos,” so you were correct.

[00:00:56]

Eric Velasco: So tell me about your dad. Demetri’s is named for your father, correct?

[00:01:01]

Sam Nakos: Demetri is my dad’s first name. It’s a Greek name. It translates as James, and a very common name over there. If you want to know when he came over and those kind of things—

[00:01:16]

Eric Velasco: Yes, please.

[00:01:17]

Sam Nakos: I was adding that up today. I think he came over in 1950. I had to do some addition. A customer asked me. He was eighty years old when he died, and he died in ’02. So we went back eighty years and we added—I think he said our whole life that he came over when he was twenty-eight. So I did a little math, and I’m going to guess he came over in 1950 after the war. And there were really two wars. There was the World War II, which he fought against Hitler, or against Italy, who was an ally of Hitler. He was a Freedom Fighter, and those are a very specialized group of people that were famous back in World War II. And then he fought a civil war in Greece, which was the communists versus the capitalists in Greece, right after World War II.

[00:02:09]

Eric Velasco: Now, as a Freedom Fighter, this was during the German occupation?

[00:02:14]

Sam Nakos: He fought just like the United States fought against Hitler. We were allies, the Greeks. I say “we.” The Greeks were allies with the United States and England against Hitler, and then Mussolini joined and allied with Hitler. So they’re neighbors, Greeks are right next door, especially Corfu, which is off the boot heel of Italy. I mean, you take the boot heel of Italy and you go down, oh, I’m going to guess—god, I don’t know how many miles, but straight off that heel, you’re going to land, on a map, with your pencil or pen in Corfu, and that’s an island in the northwest of Greece. Actually, you can see Albania from the island. Albania is above Greece. So we’re in between the boot heel of Italy, the mainland of Greece, and then there’s us. You can line of sight to Albania.

[00:03:14]

Eric Velasco: Then the next was a civil war.

[00:03:22]

Sam Nakos: Next was a civil war in Greece where the Greeks fought against the communists who were trying to take over Greece. I don’t really know too much about why. I’m going to assume that after the war, there was just some civil unrest and everything was topsy-turvy and the communists felt like it was a good time to try to take over Greece, but the capitalists won out.

My father was doing things like cutting telephone lines and wreaking havoc and spotting—I’ll tell you a quick story. Is it okay if I tell you a quick story? He didn’t talk to any of us boys. There were three boys in my family, and he never talked about the war much. We just knew he was in it. But I did hear that he was on a rowboat, a fishing boat, at night

pretending to fish, and he had a little radio, and when he spotted a German vessel—this is in that Ionian Sea—he would get on that radio and call it in. And the American—

[*Telephone interruption*]

[00:04:36]

Eric Velasco: Okay. So let’s resume. So the American—

[00:04:37]

Sam Nakos: Yes. So he was on the fishing boat, and he had the little radio, and when he spotted a German vessel, he would call it in, and the Americans would do a bomb strike on the vessel. And that did happen, I know. In fact, I met the pilot. You’re getting me on a little story here. (*Laughs*) So one day a customer who flew airplanes here in Birmingham met a man named Pat Shannon [phonetic], who was a World War II bomber pilot, and he knew my dad from eating at his first restaurant in 1961. This is how far they go back together. They’re great friends. Charlie Reagan is his name. Charlie heard my dad talk about that bombing strike before, and when he met Pat, he said, “Wait a minute. You bombed a German vessel in so-and-so?” He put them both together, and he introduced Pat to Dad, and Dad was the guy who called the bomb strike in. [*Laughs*] Of course, they’re both dead today, but pretty interesting.

[00:05:40]

Eric Velasco: That must have been quite a meeting there.

[00:05:42]

Sam Nakos: That was quite a meeting, yeah. And then later, I heard that Dad was actually pretending to be a fisherman and he had the radio. He didn’t tell us much, but I heard that from my fourth cousin. But, anyway.

[00:05:59]

Eric Velasco: So how long after that—what brought him to the States, I guess is really what I’m—

[00:06:06]

Sam Nakos: Well, I’m going to tell you what brought him to the States. His uncle came over, and I don’t know—the story is he got very successful over here. He stayed over here for ten years, went back and bought property in Greece, and that property today is where my cousins—I have seven first cousins in Corfu right now. It’s where, I’m going to say, one, two—two of them have set up shops in this little business strip. So he bought that property and then he went back there.

But his brother, which is my other father’s uncle, came to Birmingham. So it would be two of the uncles came to Birmingham. So Uncle Sam came to Birmingham this time, stayed here, lived here, got in the beer business. In fact, you were just sitting down with my Uncle Jamo. He married Uncle Sam’s daughter, and they sold Sterling and Pabst, they had a distributorship, and they became very wealthy here.

So my dad was in Greece and he wanted to follow Uncle Sam over, and he was willing to get off that little island in Greece and he was seeking the American Dream. I guess he was

seeking opportunity. And I’m sure it was very scary for a young guy like him to come all the way over the pond without speaking the language. Of course, he had that connection with Uncle Sam, so he worked for Uncle Sam and decided he wanted to do his own thing.

[00:07:41]

Eric Velasco: Is that part of how he was able to come over there?

[00:07:43]

Sam Nakos: That’s how he—well, he came over because of Uncle Sam, yeah.

[00:07:47]

Eric Velasco: Right. Uncle Sam, your uncle, his uncle—

[00:07:51]

Sam Nakos: He’s not really my—no.

[00:07:52]

Eric Velasco: Not Uncle Sam as in the government. [*Laughter*]

[00:07:55]

Sam Nakos: No. Exactly. No.

[00:07:57]

Eric Velasco: What was Sam’s last name?

[00:07:58]

Sam Nakos: His name was Nakos, and that’s my name, Sam Nakos. I’m named after him.

[*Laughs*]

[00:08:02]

Eric Velasco: So you’re named for him.

[00:08:02]

Sam Nakos: I’m named after him, right. But I’m glad you cleared that up. [*Laughs*]

Okay. It’s really my dad’s uncle, but he was like a grandfather to me, because I never met my grandfather. I met both my grandmothers, and neither one of them spoke English. One of them was my mother’s, who was in Chicago.

But, anyway, back on my father’s side from Corfu, never met my grandfather, but Uncle Sam who came over was my dad’s uncle, and he was like a grandfather to us, and I was named after him. So he was our grandfather figure.

[00:08:37]

Eric Velasco: Was he your grandfather’s brother?

[00:08:38]

Sam Nakos: He was my grandfather's brother. Exactly. But my dad got along with Uncle Sam better, I think, than he did with his own father, because all we heard about our whole life was Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam. He was great, he was successful, he was a hardcore, rugged man, and we just all loved him, you know.

[00:08:56]

Eric Velasco: Now, how did he come to get involved and start the beer distributorship?

[00:09:02]

Sam Nakos: You know, I'm not so sure, and I'm not so sure we should dig into that. [laughter] So I don't know. All I know is he made Sterling beer in the sixties the number one beer in the whole city of Birmingham. Sterling and Pabst Blue Ribbon, he had that. They had that, and they added Lowenbrau, but— [Interviewer's note: Sam Nakos started a beer distributorship in 1937, soon after Jefferson County, Alabama, legalized alcohol sales post-Prohibition. He started distributing Sterling beer in 1940. Mr. Nakos ran the distributorship, but the official partnership included his wife, Agatha Nakos and brother, Alex Nakos; with cousin Sergi Kampakis and son-in-law Chris Mitchell as minority shareholders, according to court documents. It was the top-selling beer in Birmingham for many years.]

[00:09:21]

Eric Velasco: And that was one of several businesses he owned?

[00:09:25]

Sam Nakos: Well, he had the distributorship, and then he put his daughters’ two husbands to work, and he hired a ton of people, Italians and Greeks and local Birminghamians. He was making a lot of money. But he bought a lot of property. He bought a lot of property. That’s where you’re going with that. And he owned—in fact, real quick can I say this? Of course, I have no influence in this, but my Uncle Sam donated a \$250,000 statue of Hippocrates to UAB.

[Interviewer’s note: the University of Alabama at Birmingham.]

[00:10:05]

Eric Velasco: When was this?

[00:10:06]

Sam Nakos: This is in ’72 [1972]. And you talk about 250, that’s a quarter of a million dollars in 1972. And they unveiled it and they put it outside, and now it still exists in a room. It’s an atrium down there. I don’t know exactly the street, but there is a room. UAB is so big. But there is a room that has Hippocrates. He had a Greek statue carver in 1970 carve a statue of Hippocrates. Of course, everybody knows Hippocrates was—you take the Hippocratic Oath, and he was the Father of Medicine, I would say, through the Greek history.

[00:10:43]

Eric Velasco: So why did he make the donation?

[00:10:47]

Sam Nakos: I just think he was a proud Greek and wanted to, you know, keep the—you know. The Greeks are very proud, you know. “I wanted you to see the statue of Hippocrates. That’s where medicine came from. Don’t you ever forget that it came from the Greeks.” [*Laughs*]

[00:11:03]

Eric Velasco: But it also seems to speak to something I’ve seen in a lot of Greek businessmen here, is that you have this strong connection to the homeland and to your culture, but at the same time you’re very much a strong part of the community here.

[00:11:19]

Sam Nakos: Right.

[00:11:20]

Eric Velasco: Do you think that was probably part of what he—

[00:11:22]

Sam Nakos: You know, that’s a good point, yes, and I think just because—I mean, it could have been just out of overflow of how good America has been to him and how good Birmingham has been to him. I mean, he really owned a lot of property. He bought up so much stuff, and he was so successful and he made a lot of people successful. He—I’m going to tell you another thing—loaned a lot of people money and helped. And “loan” is a bad word. He helped a lot of Greeks in this community, a lot of Greeks.

[00:12:00]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about how that relationship worked, because I’m hearing that kind of thing in some other stories too. Someone financially makes something happen for someone else to run.

[00:12:11]

Sam Nakos: Well, you know, you’ve got a Greek person that comes into a town. They’re, in my opinion, you have to understand, they’re very disoriented. They don’t know America. They came from an island. They came from a small village. They don’t speak the language, and they’re landing in this uncertain place and they want to work and provide for their wife and have kids and go to school, you know. I’m sure people like us, our heart bleeds for those kind of people, because we know they’re willing to work, they’re willing to do what it takes, and they just want to come here. If you go to Greece and you can’t speak the language, you kind of get a sympathetic feel for people who, I guess, a sympathetic feel for people who don’t speak the language, don’t fit in. You know what it’s like to feel like an alien, and you know what it’s like to feel like—but you want to become successful and you want to be part of this American Dream. And Uncle Sam knew that. I’m just answering your question because I think you were hitting on something. I think he felt for them, you know.

[00:13:25]

Eric Velasco: Do you know when he came over from Greece?

[00:13:28]

Sam Nakos: Uncle Sam, well, it had to be—Jamo could have answered that question, and he’s right there in the dining room. I’m going to say—boy, I can’t answer that—forties.

[Interviewer’s note: Uncle Sam Nakos opened his beer distributorship in Birmingham in 1937, so his arrival predated that.]

[00:13:47]

Eric Velasco: Did he come over alone or with anyone else?

[Sound of bell from take-out window]

[00:13:50]

Sam Nakos: I think he came over alone, but his brother was here, and I don’t know if his brother came alone, but his brother was here, Gus. And Gus went back. So I think they were here together, and then he brought his other brother, Aleck [phonetic], over here. So you have three brothers out of about five or seven children: Gus, Aleck, and Sam. And Sam stayed and Uncle Aleck stayed. So we call them “uncle,” but they’re really the next level up.

[00:14:18]

Eric Velasco: Now, was Corfu as big a pipeline to Birmingham as places like Tsitalia and Peleta?

[00:14:25]

Sam Nakos: That’s a good question. I would say Tsitalia, you know, you hear that word because of George Sarris, but, I mean, that’s a small village. [Interviewer’s note: George C. Sarris is owner of Fish Market Southside restaurant.]

So is Corfu. These are all small villages. And I don’t understand—a friend of mine explained to me that Mobile was a big port back then, and Greeks, there were ships and boats instead of airplanes. The movement was more, I think, on the boats, the transfer of people. And I think Mobile could have played into it. Birmingham was a steel city. There was another draw, a magnetic draw, I guess, for people.

[00:15:03]

Eric Velasco: The mines as well.

[00:15:05]

Sam Nakos: Uh-huh, the mines. Could we say it was booming? I don’t know, you know. Yeah, it was, but—

[*To-go window bell rings*]

[00:15:24]

Eric Velasco: Did your Uncle Sam sponsor your father coming over? In other words, did your father come directly to Birmingham, work his way directly to Birmingham, or were there stops along the way?

[00:15:34]

Sam Nakos: You know, my dad just followed him over here. My dad just did what he could to get over here. I don’t even know how he got over here except for—he didn’t explain that to us. He came over and he worked for Uncle Sam in the beer warehouse, and I always heard my whole life about the warehouse and how hot it was to stack beer. Whenever I had a complaint about work, he said, “Sam, you have no idea what it’s like to be in that hot warehouse stacking beer at 104.” And I heard that story over and over, and I quit complaining. [*Laughs*] So that’s what he did.

[00:16:12]

Eric Velasco: This is when you two were standing over a hot barbecue pit? [*laughter*]

[00:16:15]

Sam Nakos: Oh, here we go. From one thing to another. No. I will say this. His story was worse than mine. It was the “uphill in snow both ways,” and he always got me on that, and I was too young to figure out that—but I did figure out the more I complained, he could outdo me on his complaints, and it shut me up a little bit and put me back to work.

But Dad—if I can just explore this. My father—and I think I’m a little like him—my father did not want anything from anybody, and he wanted to carve out his own living, his own way of—you know, he had to survive on his own. He didn’t want it given to him. He didn’t want another man’s dime. And I think finally he came to the conclusion that he had to go out and get in another business, because he didn’t want the nepotism to follow him the rest of his life. You know, you’re sitting there under the shadow of a very rich man, very successful, and

you think, “Well, I can just ride this coattail or I could go out there and be my own man.” And I think that’s the kind of man my dad was. I mean, he just got out of fighting in World War II. He was tough, you know. Then he fought another war. He was a strong man, you know.

[00:17:35]

Eric Velasco: He knew how to survive.

[00:17:37]

Sam Nakos: Yes, and he just wanted his own living. So I think he asked Uncle Sam to manage a little barbecue joint in Ensley that Uncle Sam owned, and that was called—hmm. God, I knew it my whole life. Let me see. I’m going blank. It was called—I’ll get it in a second.

[00:17:54]

Eric Velasco: Oakland? [Interviewer’s note: Oakland Barbecue. Ensley is a community in west Birmingham that once had a steel mill.]

[00:17:55]

Sam Nakos: Oakland Barbecue. Did you read that?

[00:17:57]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:17:57]

Sam Nakos: Okay. You knew that. Okay, good. Thank you. Oakland Barbecue. So he managed Oakland and they sold beer. It was really more of a beer joint. I remember him saying, “I couldn’t stand staying up at two o’clock in the morning, and I didn’t like breaking up fights, and I didn’t like to—.” He just didn’t like the beer late-night business. He wanted a family man.

[00:18:16]

Eric Velasco: And these were steelworkers, too, right?

[00:18:19]

Sam Nakos: Gosh, exactly. Thank you for adding that. Steelworkers. I think it just got a little bit to where he’s like, “I don’t want that, but I do want the barbecue.” And he took the barbecue part of it, and then he went over to Homewood in 1961 and opened up El Rancho. But he had a partner, because at first, like I said, Uncle Sam was the landlord of Oakland Barbecue, and my father paid him. Then he went to El Rancho after that in 1961, and he wanted to—he had a partner because he didn’t have the money. Now, in 1961, he opened that up, but he already had two kids and a wife, which I didn’t tell you how he met my mother.

[00:19:07]

Eric Velasco: We were going to back up and get into that in a second.

[00:19:09]

Sam Nakos: Okay. Okay. You want me to keep going?

[00:19:10]

Eric Velasco: Please keep going. Actually, let’s stop right now, because then we can bring it all up to date there. I did want to ask, first of all, what’s your mom’s name?

[00:19:19]

Sam Nakos: Helen.

[00:19:20]

Eric Velasco: Full name?

[00:19:22]

Sam Nakos: Helen Heotis, H-e-o-t-i-s. She’s from Chicago, and she had an aunt down here and she was visiting her aunt and somehow—this is the story I heard—a photo got over to my dad, and my dad wanted to meet her.

Now, I’m going to tell you, my mother was born in Chicago, very—and I’m going to just describe my mother—very classy woman. My dad, he was a village boy, village man, with a heavy accent. And here you meet this lady from Chicago who went to the Art Institute. But her mother didn’t speak a word of English and neither did her father. So she’s Greek, but socially a little different. And I think my dad threw a bunch of charm on her. She’s a great woman. I love my mom. I love my dad too. But she was a great mom. So they married, and they had three kids in a row, I mean year after year.

[00:20:33]

Eric Velasco: Who are the names and birth order?

[00:20:36]

Sam Nakos: George is my older brother, he’s one year older than me, and then I was born, I’m the middle, Sam, and then Dean. Technically, I think Dean was more than twelve months, but they threw us all into school together, I think for convenience sake. *[Laughs]* When George was in the twelfth grade, I was in the eleventh grade, Dean was in the tenth grade, and, of course, we heard a lot from the teachers about how all three of the Nakoses were going to be in Mountain Brook High School together. *[Laughs]* George was a 265-pound football player.

[00:21:10]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[00:21:11]

Sam Nakos: He blocked for Major Ogilvie, and they were best friends.

[00:21:14]

Eric Velasco: And for the listeners, please tell them who Major Ogilvie is

[00:21:16]

Sam Nakos: Major Ogilvie was—Mountain Brook was two—

[*Telephone interruption*]

[00:21:33]

Sam Nakos: Mountain Brook, in 1970—I think it's '6 and '7—won two state championships in a row. [Interviewer's note: The Mountain Brook High Spartans won state football championships in 1975 and 1976.]

George was on that team. He blocked for Major Ogilvie. Four people in '77 got scholarships, 1977. It's probably Mountain Brook's best year of football. It's legendary, let's just say. Major's legendary. Major Ogilvie ran off of my brother's—as a guard, he ran off my brother's block. Major went to go play for Bear Bryant at Alabama and became pretty well known, very famous, and was going to play pro football, and that's the story behind that. They're kind of local legends around Homewood, Mountain Brook, Vestavia.

[00:22:19]

Eric Velasco: What does George do now?

[00:22:20]

Sam Nakos: George is a mortgage guy. He does mortgages. And he's thin. I'm bigger than he is. [*Laughs*]

[00:22:28]

Eric Velasco: And your younger brother?

[00:22:30]

Sam Nakos: Dean moved to North Carolina, but he’s lived in Birmingham and he’s been around here, but he moved to North Carolina. He got an engineering degree.

George played one year at Auburn and decided he didn’t like the coach. And Gene Bartow was not a great coach, so I kind of look back and I think, well, he’s sort of smart. And he wanted to go to Clemson. Now, they were national champions two years later, so he was kind of on the right track. But he went to Vanderbilt and got his economics Master’s.

Now, you know, I’m bragging on their degrees because I stayed at the restaurant business the whole time. I went to one year of college, hit a dead end. It wasn’t for me. I knew where my heart was. Something kept tugging me. I was having dinner with my mother and father one night, just us three, I was just saying, you know—and my dad just made me a little offer over dinner, very nice. “Sam, come to work for me. I’ll give you a percentage. We’ll be partners, and then I’ll find a way for this restaurant to be yours.”

[00:23:37]

Eric Velasco: How old were you then?

[00:23:39]

Sam Nakos: I was twenty, but I started at eight years old at El Rancho.

[00:23:43]

Eric Velasco: And that sounded—I want to hear that story.

[00:23:46]

Sam Nakos: Okay. At eight years old?

[00:23:48]

Eric Velasco: Yes. [laughter]

[00:23:49]

Sam Nakos: How can you laugh now at something you cried so much about back then?

[Laughs] Okay. I’m sitting in my dad’s Mountain Brook house in front of the TV, watching those cartoons as an eight-year-old kid, and it was a Saturday morning, and the phone would ring. [Laughs] My mother answered it and hung up the phone and said, “Sam, Dad wants you to go to work.”

I go, “What?” And I was just blown away, and I started crying. She got me in that car, and I cried the whole way.

As soon as I got to work, Eric, I had a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun, because there was the pie maker, and her name was Zuella [phonetic], and she was back there making pies with the roller pin, back and forth with the dough and cutting them up in circles and putting filling in them and fry them. Then I got to be friends with the man who bussed tables, named Reggie. Then, of course, my dad was there and his Greek cook was there, and, you know, they welcomed me. I was the little eight-year-old. I was hanging around the restaurant, and it wasn’t like I was working hard. It’s just as much as I was kind of hanging around this restaurant culture, and I was okay.

[00:25:10]

Eric Velasco: It was a big clubhouse.

[00:25:11]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, it was a big—it wasn’t as bad as the initial—you know, I guess, dreading to go a workout or dreading afterwards. Once you’re there—they say 50 percent of the battle is getting to the gym. But, anyway.

[00:25:29]

Eric Velasco: And why were you called in that day?

[00:25:31]

Sam Nakos: Well, my dad said because the dish washer didn’t show up. [*Laughs*]

[00:25:36]

Eric Velasco: Did you keep going in after that?

[00:25:41]

Sam Nakos: I think my dad knew that he was going to have to pick one of us, and we were going to go ahead and start getting them—like I say this, Eric, about my—you know. I never had kids, I never got married, but I say this about my daughter or my son. If I had a son, he’d be in the front right there, handing out toothpicks to the customers. I mean, it’d be cute, you know, right?

[00:26:03]

Eric Velasco: That’s how he would grow up and—

[00:26:05]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, let him get oriented with work, and, hey, what better place? The waitresses would love him, and everybody could, you know, hug him and show him how to do things. You know, I’ve got twenty-five teachers around here. Yeah, they would like him.

[00:26:21]

Eric Velasco: Neither brother showed any interest?

[00:26:24]

Sam Nakos: No.

[00:26:27]

Eric Velasco: I’m sure your dad tried.

[00:26:27]

Sam Nakos: He went down the row. When George and my dad knew how alike they were, that was a no-go situation.

[00:26:37]

Eric Velasco: And I guess with the football, he didn’t have a whole lot of time either.

[00:26:40]

Sam Nakos: I think they were just a lot alike. You know, the middle kid is a little bit more amiable, a little malleable, malleable, whatever the word is. And, you know, I was more of a pleaser. George was more of a, “I’m George. I’m this way. This is the way I am.” And I think I kind of got in here, and, I don’t know, I’ve got to tell you, I really prayed a lot about it when I was a kid, twenty, when I say I was a kid, but it was what I was supposed to do.

[00:27:12]

Eric Velasco: Did you have that feeling when your dad made the offer?

[00:27:15]

Sam Nakos: You know, I didn’t have a feeling. There was something he just conjured inside of me that was always there, you know. It’s always there, and I think my mom and dad just kind of very quietly let it happen, let the offer come across the table, and they knew they couldn’t force me, and they just let it naturally happen. And I just said, “Okay.”

[00:27:41]

Eric Velasco: What did you guys eat at home growing up? What did your mom cook for you?

[00:27:44]

Sam Nakos: That’s a great question. My mother cooked every single meal. We had Greek chicken with potatoes or we had a lot of food that my dad liked to eat, had a lot of food that—there was some Greek stuff. We went out some, but not much. There was a meal on the table

almost every night at six, six-thirty. I just remember the chicken coming out of the oven and the potatoes. And what else did we eat? Oh, god, I’m going blank on that. I know it wasn’t Pastitsio, Moussaka, some of the harder things to cook. I don’t think we did that.

[00:28:22]

Eric Velasco: I hear those things take forever to cook and it’s hard for a homemaker to do it.

[00:28:27]

Sam Nakos: It’s like who in the world is going to make Baklava unless you are a grandmother with nothing to do for, like, your life, and you can sit there and do those layers and layers. No, no, you can’t do that.

[00:28:42]

Eric Velasco: Was your dad able to join y’all for dinner?

[00:28:44]

Sam Nakos: Oh, yeah, came home every night. Now, every night he came home at five. He worked six days a week, and he’d get there early. He’s an early bird. But he came home at night at five, five or six, and, yeah, he was there.

[00:29:00]

Eric Velasco: How did your dad learn to cook?

[00:29:02]

Sam Nakos: God, that’s a good question, but he’s an unbelievable cook. I’ve never understood where he learned. I think he just—man, could he cook. Best lamb. I’ll tell you a quick story. He started cooking lamb outside of the Greek church with a couple of Greeks, on a spit across the street or in the yard, and next thing you know, there’s a Greek food festival going on. I’m telling you, that’s—

[00:29:32]

Eric Velasco: This was the precursor for the Greek food festival?

[00:29:34]

Sam Nakos: This was, and I don’t know who else was there with him, because he’s older than—Angelos Petelos, I get that name in my head, but Dad started that little “Let’s cook and have a little—.” You know, that’s how they used to raise money. When we were kids, we’d come up with a Souvlaki dinner and we’d sell \$5 tickets. “Hey, do you want to come to the dinner after church?” And the fathers would get us to go sell the tickets, and we’d raise a little money.

[00:30:04]

Eric Velasco: We’re talking about skewered grilled meat.

[00:30:06]

Sam Nakos: Skewered grilled meat, Souvlaki, yeah, that’s right. Shish kebobs.

So Dad started that. One year he came up with this elegant Night in Athens at the Civic Center, and he thought it up himself and got some friends to help him, a formal Greek band at the Civic Center, Night in Athens. Tickets were expensive, \$25, and you would go in there and get a full Greek dinner, the Greek music, and have a Greek experience, and I think when they did that and realized that the Civic Center wanted to be in charge of the food, and there was a conflict on—I’m just going to assume that they wanted to pay—Dad figured it out, “Hey, we can make more money, and we’ll just do it at the church.” I don’t know for sure, but I think those were the guys, like you said, the precursor to the Greek food festival.

[00:30:58]

Eric Velasco: So this would have been the late sixties? I think it started in ’72, ’73?

[00:31:01]

Sam Nakos: Let’s see. Late sixties, exactly. I think I was—I’m going to say it’s ’72. Did it start in ’72? [Interviewer’s note: The Birmingham Greek Festival started in 1972.]

[00:31:07]

Eric Velasco: Something like that.

[00:31:08]

Sam Nakos: I’m thinking ’72 [1972], because I remember I was at the Night in Athens and I was old enough to have a crush on one of the Greek girls, and I know exactly who she is.

[Laughs]

[00:31:17]

Eric Velasco: Are you going to name names?

[00:31:18]

Sam Nakos: No, probably not. No, no, not really. Not because I’m embarrassed. Deborah Baloukis [phonetic]. I think we talked a little bit that night. I didn’t have a big crush on her, but we both looked nice. You know, we’re kids, twelve-year-olds dressed up that night. So anyway.

[00:31:39]

Eric Velasco: So I read somewhere that your dad wasn’t just a good Greek cook; he cooked all kinds of food real well.

[00:31:50]

Sam Nakos: I’m going to tell you, my dad cooked the best lamb I’ve ever eaten in my life, in my *life*, and he could cook the best spaghetti in my life, still to this day. In Corfu there’s this dish that they call Pastitsata, which is a Greek word for pasta, and it’s a certain Corfu procedure that they do for the spaghetti. My dad could nail it. Unbelievable. I spent my whole life where my dad would call us on Friday or Saturday and say, “Hey, I’m cooking Sunday.”

I go, “You are? Okay.” And I would call my cousins and call my friends here in the community, “Hey, Dad’s cooking Sunday.”

They’re like, boom, we’re over there right after church. Big spaghetti. And my dad would always tell me, “Please save some sauce for others, Sam. You’re putting too much sauce on your spaghetti.” It was just delicious.

And he was great. He was a great cook, and he spent his whole life with my mother entertaining customers and people that became their close friends. And Dad would always cook, always. He was the cook.

[00:32:57]

Eric Velasco: Entertaining in what sense, inviting them over?

[00:32:59]

Sam Nakos: Entertaining like, “Hey.”

[*Telephone interruption*]

[00:33:09]

Sam Nakos: Entertaining in the sense that he would invite people over to his house, and he and my mom would have—they had a little room. We called it the veranda, and the kitchen was joined, and he finally windowed it in and put a fireplace in it. They would just set up a buffet or set up a big dinner table, and they would just cook. Dad would cook, and they would have people over.

[00:33:33]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like a special relationship with his customers.

[00:33:37]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. You know, well, it was certain people, certain people that he got close to. He was a black-and-white guy, now. He looked at you and liked you within about a minute, or, you know, maybe five minutes. You could win him over, you know. But if he didn’t like you, he kind of—he could size you up pretty quick, is what I’m trying to say.

[00:34:01]

Eric Velasco: And there was no undoing that?

[00:34:03]

Sam Nakos: You know, maybe undoing is okay. You could probably undo it, but what I’m saying is there’s a lot of times he’s shown me throughout the years as a young guy that he would tell me somebody—he could just look at somebody. I swear, I’m not lying to you, he could look at somebody and tell you if they were a crook or not. I’m just being honest.

[00:34:21]

Eric Velasco: That must have been very helpful to you as you’re learning the ropes.

[00:34:23]

Sam Nakos: You know, but I always argued with him. [*Laughs*] “No, he’s a friend of mine. He’s great.”

He said, “Sam, watch out for that one.” [*Laughs*]

There’s one exception, of course, my doctor friend who Dad didn’t know he was an ER doctor. He had long red hair, and Dad didn’t like his hair. Back in the day, they didn’t do that hippie thing. Wally would come in and I would talk to Wally. I said, “Dad, he’s a doctor.”

He goes, “You mean that kid’s been to college?” [*Laughs*]

And I said, “Yes, he’s an ER doctor.” And the next thing I know, Dad’s sitting down with him and having a great time. They’re both laughing over there. But Dad told me that—you know. But he was a great judge of character, though. I will give him that.

[00:35:06]

Eric Velasco: He obviously came over here knowing how to cook, at least having some [unclear].

[00:35:12]

Sam Nakos: I just don’t know where he learned to cook. I really don’t. I wish I could ask him right now, but I do not know where he learned to cook.

[00:35:20]

Eric Velasco: But it probably—where he figured out the barbecue business was at Oakland.

[00:35:25]

Sam Nakos: Oakland, yeah.

[00:35:27]

Eric Velasco: Tell me how southern barbecue is different from Greek grilled meats.

[00:35:31]

Sam Nakos: I’ll tell you, if I can angle it a little different, in Greece when you cook a lamb over coal, you’re using the same techniques. You’re using lamb over open flame, you’re basting, you’re adding the local spices. And barbecue, of course, is hickory wood, and it’s mostly pork here in Birmingham, and it wouldn’t be Greek spices, but it would be local spices, sort of the same kind of feel, though, how do we cook this meat, how do we do it over an open flame. So grilling, I think it’s an easy transition from what he was doing, and the barbecue sauce was southern. You don’t have this red barbecue sauce in Greece, and you don’t eat pork over hickory. There’s probably no hickory in Greece. I mean, I’m going to say there’s absolutely none. But when I said that, I’m thinking of a similar wood, whether it’s mesquite, you know. I’m going to say there’s not a lot of hickory trees in—

[00:36:38]

Eric Velasco: Cedar?

[00:36:39]

Sam Nakos: You know, cedar, to me, doesn’t—I don’t know. I’ve never been a—I love hickory flavor, and I’m going to say probably a mesquite is a good wood. We don’t get mesquite. Mesquite would be \$500 a load, \$700 a load. My guy’s bringing a load tomorrow for 120.

So whatever wood flavors the meat. So we’re on the wood-flavoring meat right now. But I think Dad transitioned into something he could make a living doing here in Birmingham, and barbecue tradition’s crazy. These people just—it’s a tradition. They have to have barbecue on certain holidays. And we don’t just get through with the holidays, of course; it’s an everyday thing. So people love it here in Birmingham.

[00:37:24]

Eric Velasco: So why is it that we wound up with so many Greeks running barbecue stands here? At one point, it seemed like the majority were Greek-run.

[00:37:31]

Sam Nakos: You know, people don’t understand that, because they hear the name Demetri’s and they think, “That’s Greek.” But let’s talk about that for a second. Jamo, you just met my Uncle Jamo sitting down. He was Uncle Sam’s son-in-law. His first cousin is Jim Pihakis, of Jim ‘N Nick’s.

[00:37:52]

Eric Velasco: And Jamo’s last name is?

[00:37:55]

Sam Nakos: Pihakis, same name. His first cousin is the father of Jim Pihakis, and then there’s Jim Junior and Nick. Those are the Jim and Nick. So he named the restaurant. But that’s his first cousin. So they’re 100 percent Greek, and they’re probably—he mentioned he’s from

Rhodes, and so they’re from Rhodes. And another great restaurateur in Birmingham, a very famous barbecue guy, was Michael Matsos, and Mike Matsos owned the Golden Rules. So you have the Golden Rule. The Jim ‘N Nick’s guys, I will say this, they’re latecomers.

[00:38:36]

Eric Velasco: Right.

[00:38:37]

Sam Nakos: They came in the eighties. [Interviewer’s note: Jim ‘N Nick’s Community Bar-B-Q was established in 1985.]

That’s newcomers, as far as I’m concerned. You had Mike Matsos, my father, and you also in Bessemer was—they were an American family, Van Sykes, Bob Sykes Barbecue.

[00:38:54]

Eric Velasco: Then Andrew’s.

[00:38:56]

Sam Nakos: I don’t know how popular Andrew’s was, but I know Ollie’s was huge back then, and they were an American Birmingham family, different style. So then came the Johnny Ray’s, they were Italian, and, of course, I’m considering them newcomers, too, as far as I’m concerned. Then the Lebanese have jumped into this, Full Moon, so you don’t really have any—with the exception of Van Sykes, you really don’t have anybody in the barbecue business that’s coming to my mind right now that is not, has a foreign ancestry. That’s my opinion. I’m going to be

wrong. Somebody’s going to probably correct me on that. But I think that’s pretty much it, you know. [Interviewer’s note: Dreamland Bar-B-Que was founded in 1958 by John “Big Daddy” Bishop in Tuscaloosa. After purchasing the company in 1993, Bobby Underwood opened the first Birmingham location and eventually located the franchise headquarters there. Miss Myra’s Pitt Bar B Q in the Cahaba Heights community was opened in 1984 by Myra and Clark Roundtree.]

[00:39:39]

Eric Velasco: So tell me about the transition from Oakland to El Rancho.

[00:39:46]

Sam Nakos: God, I wish I could tell you more. I just know that the beer and the late hours, I just remember hearing that as a kid, “That’s no way—.” My dad just wanted to be a family man, and he installed some structure in his life. I never saw my dad drink. I mean, I think I saw him drink two or three gulps of beer just to taste it. But he came home at five, five-thirty every night. We sat down and ate a meal. He didn’t want a bar. And we do not serve alcohol in this store and—

[00:40:25]

Eric Velasco: You never have?

[00:40:28]

Sam Nakos: We never have. Dad said, “I’m going to do it without serving beer.” And I’ll be honest with you, if you ever think about that—you’re giving me a look. You’re going—you’re looking at me. But I’m going to tell you this. This’ll be funny. I’m going to say this. Do you know any barbecue places that can survive without selling beer?

[00:40:46]

Eric Velasco: Not many.

[00:40:47]

Sam Nakos: If you take the beer license away from all those other ones, they’re not going to make it. I’m just sayin’. I don’t know. They probably will. But there’s not too many people that are willing to try it. That’s how strong my dad was and how hard he worked, and I’m here to carry it on.

[00:41:01]

Eric Velasco: He wanted a family atmosphere.

[00:41:03]

Sam Nakos: He wanted a family atmosphere, and he also wanted to go home at night and not worry about things that could occur with people after they’ve drank a few beers. You know, the restaurant will do a number on your nerves, so at night you actually want to be with your family. You want to relax. So we were open three meals a day, so he was here for breakfast.

[00:41:29]

Eric Velasco: And that’s also, I assume, why he wanted to be closed on Sundays.

[00:41:34]

Sam Nakos: Yes, closed on Sundays. We were at the Greek Church. I mean, not every single Sunday, but he raised us at the Greek Church, raised us going to Greek conventions, which is probably something maybe the viewers don’t understand. But a Greek convention is like Atlanta with the convention. We’d all play basketball against the Atlanta teams, and the people from Savannah would come down, and we’d meet all these Greek young kids. We’d all play basketball for a couple days, then we’d have a Greek dance at night, and, you know, the older guys could sit around and talk and have a great time, and the youth would grow up in this Greek community. So he raised us going to conventions, going to the Greek Church, and—

[00:42:15]

Eric Velasco: Did you speak Greek at home?

[00:42:18]

Sam Nakos: No, we did not.

[00:42:21]

Eric Velasco: Did your dad ever explain or your mom ever explain why?

[00:42:25]

Sam Nakos: No, but I think I know why. [*Laughs*]

[00:42:29]

Eric Velasco: Why do you think that was?

[00:42:30]

Sam Nakos: I think he—my dad did not have the patience or the energy after a long day’s work to start teaching us Greek. We barely got through our homework. [*Laughs*] That’s my opinion. But my dad and mother talked Greek to each other. My mother spoke fluent Greek, although she was born in Chicago. Of course, in order for her to communicate to her parents, she had to speak Greek. They were from Sparta, so I always throw that in. Sometimes I say, “I’m half Spartan. Don’t mess with me.” [*Laughs*]

Anyway, so they both spoke Greek, and we had Greek people, but Dad took us—oh, another thing is Dad took us to Greece in the summers. Like we’d go for two months every other year. He’d take us to the village. We’d stay there for a month. We’d go into town and stay at my cousin’s hotel for a couple of weeks. He’d send my mother ahead.

Then the next summer would roll around. Of course, everybody here in Mountain Brook, they were going to their lake houses and down to Florida. We went to Greece. I know we stayed probably—we went three times in high school, and I know we went—or two times in high school. I know we went as children, and then we went as—I’m booking a trip right now to try to go in May. But he wanted us in that culture.

[00:43:49]

Eric Velasco: That was important to maintain those relationships and that connection.

[00:43:54]

Sam Nakos: It is. It’s important. And when my dad died, I said, “I’ve got to get over there, because all these relationships, they’ll just kind of disappear.” So I said, “I’ve got to go over there and start keep it going.” And I’m on the computer right now. I keep up with all my cousins, and it’s not like there’s a gap, you know. I’ve waited five years sometimes to go over there, but I can pick up where I left off, and we tell stories about—when we’re over there, we always talk about my dad. His best friends were in Greece. You know, he died in his best friend’s lap over there.

[00:44:25]

Eric Velasco: I was going to ask you about that later, but please tell me about it now.

Sam Nakos: Well, my dad went to Greece. My mother passed away before this, and my dad stayed single for a long time, and then he tried to remarry, but I think he really—it was hard for him to find a replacement for my mother. I think they just—she was just an outstanding person. But he did remarry another outstanding woman, but I just think it was hard for my dad.

[Telephone interruption]

[00:45:00]

Sam Nakos: My dad did remarry another nice lady, but I think—but, anyway, in the process, Dad would continue to go to Greece, continue to go to Greece. He’d go twice a year. In Corfu they have probably the biggest Easter celebration with the Greek Orthodox Church in any of the places I would say in Greece. There’s 400,000 people in the streets, in the streets right in front of my cousin’s hotel, and the priest does a service in the streets and lights a candle, and that person lights another candle to another person. That person lights another candle, and that person lights another candle. And you have 400,000—200,000 to 400,000 in the streets with a candle in their hand, and it slowly just catches on fire. And he’s viewing this from the balcony of my cousin’s hotel, and he did it every year. And he loved the Easter service over there. I’ve never been to Easter over there, but it’s absolutely—can you imagine? Unbelievable.

[00:46:03]

Eric Velasco: Is this on the land that your Uncle Sam bought?

[00:46:06]

Sam Nakos: No, this is right there in the middle of the town of Corfu town, the center of the town. My cousin owns a hotel right there. Now, behind that, a couple of blocks, there’s a little building, couple of buildings my uncle bought. But I will say this. I’ll throw one little fact in there. Across from my cousin’s hotel is where Napoleon had his horse stables, and this is in the 1700s. I think Napoleon was around 17-something to 1719 or something, somewhere in there.

[Interviewer’s note: The French occupied Corfu from 1807 until 1815 during Napoleon’s reign.]

I don’t think he ruled that region for more than fifteen, twenty years or ten, twenty years, somewhere in there. I don’t know. I don’t know every detail. But his horse stables were across the street, and he would go over there with all of his aristocratic snobs, and they had the big archways for two blocks. And he would hang out in there, and they called it the *Liston*, which means “the list,” which means if you’re not on the list, you’re not allowed in, and this was Napoleon’s French snobbery for his aristocratic friends.

So that’s 100 feet in front of my cousin’s hotel. That’s where we drink coffee today. So when I go to Greece, I meet everybody, all my cousins, right there at the *Liston* and we drink. They’ve converted all the stables into cafes and restaurants. Then right across the street, there’s trees and umbrellas, and behind that’s a cricket field, and behind that’s a fort that is 400 years old that you look at. That’s the view you’re getting. The Italians come in and drink coffee there. It’s a famous spot, not for Americans, but for Europeans, very famous.

[00:47:48]

Eric Velasco: The Eastern church and Western church celebrate Easter at the same time?

[00:47:53]

Sam Nakos: You know, the Eastern Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox, I’m not sure. We’re on that—and are we on the Gregorian calendar? We’re on the ancient calendar, whichever that is, and it has to do with the moon, because the Passover happened with the Jews. They were staring at full moons. They were judging everything by the full moons. So that’s when they had Passover. So Passover would be equal to Easter, and our Easter would occur after the full moon. Okay.

[00:48:31]

Eric Velasco: So let’s go up to—the partner in El Rancho, was he Greek?

[00:48:39]

Sam Nakos: He was not. I remember him being Lebanese, I think, or something like that, and he was not—all I know is my mother would tell us that, “Dad’s the guy that’s doing the work,” and he, I guess, had the money to go in partners. But Dad couldn’t wait to get out of that partnership, and he told me my whole life—I don’t know if I should say this, but he said, “Sam, don’t ever be partners with anybody.” *[Laughs]* So, lesson to people who are not in partnerships. *[Laughs]*

[00:49:13]

Eric Velasco: And, fortunately, he left you in good shape to do that.

[00:49:15]

Sam Nakos: Yes, he did. He did. And I was partners with *him*, though, for a while, so in a way I kind of got a good taste of it. There was a lot of togetherness in here, Eric, a lot of togetherness.

[00:49:27]

Eric Velasco: This is a very small office.

[00:49:29]

Sam Nakos: Well, our office wasn’t—this is huge. Our office was back in the stockroom, and it was a table, one chair, one phone.

[00:49:36]

Eric Velasco: Two guys.

[00:49:38]

Sam Nakos: Two guys.

[00:49:39]

Eric Velasco: Or worse, dad and son.

[00:49:41]

Sam Nakos: His timing, he would come in at eight. I would come in at eleven. I would close. I’d get off, go eleven to nine. He would come in at eight and go eleven to whenever. But I’d walk in and have to make three or four phone calls, things on my head that I wanted to call a salesperson, I wanted to do this, and that’s when he decided to use the phone. I’m, “Dad, you’ve been here all morning. Use the phone before I get here.”

“No, I just want to make one phone call.”

I’m like—it was so claustrophobic for a while, but he liked it. He didn’t mind it. I did. I liked a little—

[00:50:12]

Eric Velasco: It was part of the banter, right?

[00:50:13]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, I think, yeah. I mean, I don’t know if he was enjoying torturing me or not, but— [*Laughs*]

[00:50:18]

Eric Velasco: Now, the El Rancho, it’s a little piece of Homewood history here.

[00:50:26]

Sam Nakos: It is.

[00:50:27]

Eric Velasco: It was a landmark.

[00:50:29]

Sam Nakos: Yes, it was.

[00:50:30]

Eric Velasco: There wasn’t a Red Mountain Expressway here then—

[00:50:33]

Sam Nakos: No, there was not a Red—

[00:50:34]

Eric Velasco: —which is, what, about a six-lane highway going over the mountain, connecting downtown and Homewood. How would people get from downtown over the Red Mountain and around to Homewood?

[00:50:45]

Sam Nakos: Well, if you had to go downtown, you had to go down 20th Street. Twentieth Street is the street that Vulcan’s on. [Interviewer’s note: Vulcan is a landmark statue on Red Mountain.]

It goes over Red Mountain, then curves down, and goes down into Five Points South, and that’s the only way to go. There was no expressway, like you said, and so anyone coming from south on 31 came and turned at the block after the Piggly Wiggly, came into Homewood, actually heading west, then did a right-hand turn that was called the curve, and it wasn’t a rectangle, it was a curve. [Interviewer’s note: Piggy Wiggly is a grocery store chain.]

Then once they got on that curve, right in front of 18th Street, that beautiful, wonderful street in Homewood that’s so famous, Shaia’s is on the left. [Interviewer’s note: Shaia’s is an upscale men’s clothing store.]

All the wonderful shops are on the right. These famous places, some of them are still there. You head straight north up that street, and you don’t stop until you go to Vulcan and go over the mountain, Red Mountain, and then you come down into Southside, and then you just

keep heading north, past UAB, and then you go into downtown. So everybody went to downtown that one road. So Dad was on the—

[00:52:11]

Eric Velasco: So if you’re going that direction, you’d go right by El Rancho.

[00:52:14]

Sam Nakos: That’s it. Geographically, if you can understand—I may have confused some people, but geographically he was on the main road, being, I guess, where the Aloft [hotel] is now. He was right there. That was the main street of the main thoroughfare. So what a great location he picked.

[00:52:34]

Eric Velasco: Everybody had to slow down either direction.

[00:52:36]

Sam Nakos: Smell the barbecue. And back then there was him, Golden Rule in Irondale, and Ollie’s. That was it.

[00:52:45]

Eric Velasco: And you said pretty much your audience was more geographic than anything else.

[00:52:52]

Sam Nakos: You mean from—

[00:52:54]

Eric Velasco: Like in the Homewood area, you would tend to go to El Rancho.

[00:52:58]

Sam Nakos: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:52:59]

Eric Velasco: In the Irondale area, you would go to the Golden Rule—

[00:53:00]

Sam Nakos: Exactly. That’s true.

[00:53:02]

Eric Velasco: —based on where they are.

[00:53:04]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, that’s exactly true.

[00:53:07]

Eric Velasco: Now, did El Rancho serve barbecue all along or—

[00:53:11]

Sam Nakos: El Rancho served breakfast and barbecue, and the limited menu is still hanging up here in Demetri’s. You can go look at the menu from the sixties, and, oh, I think every restaurateur wished they had a limited menu like that now. Nobody can compete. Even Chick-fil-A has added salads and this and that. And we had to expand our menu like crazy. Our menu is way bigger now, but it was so limited. I loved it. Barbecue pork sandwich, fifty five cents. Barbecue beef sandwich, fifty five cents. French fry, twenty five cents. Pork plate, beef plate, rib plate, \$2-something or \$1-something, whatever. You know, just had basic—eggs. I think my dad even had a few crazy things like egg sandwich, and then he had fresh doughnuts [*Laughs*], some of the things that people—chili con carne. I don’t think people even say “con carne” anymore.

[00:54:17]

Eric Velasco: So it was more like a lunch, dinner stand kind of thing?

[00:54:23]

Sam Nakos: Yes, that’s what it was.

[00:54:25]

Eric Velasco: How many seats, do you know?

[00:54:26]

Sam Nakos: At El Rancho, I’m going to guess fifty, forty.

[00:54:31]

Eric Velasco: Fairly substantial.

[00:54:33]

Sam Nakos: Mm-hmm, and a lot of to-go business, and, god, back in the sixties, way before—that’s back when there weren’t drive-thrus. They were drive-ins, drive-in theaters. And you’d walk up to the counter and order to go, and get a sack of sandwiches. God, man, I mean, everything was cheap, simple, get a Coke, and take a big sack of sandwiches home. And he had the fried pies, of course, peach and apple. I’d look at the menu. I think they were thirty cents, maybe thirty five cents. I’m guessing.

[00:55:09]

Eric Velasco: Now, the fried pies are fairly unusual around here.

[00:55:11]

Sam Nakos: Yes, they are. I think everybody’s given up on a fried pie. They don’t want to do it. They don’t want to take a roller pin and roll out dough. No, that’s too much work. So we never quit. We do it. We do it by hand and we’re famous for it. I love it. I think it’s a cool thing. I mean, I’m not saying it’s the most ultimate dessert I’ve ever eaten in my life, because, I mean, chefs come out with great things. But, I mean, you’re talking about a fried pie, fried turnover. I mean, it is—I’m surprised. You know, that little fried pie is pretty famous, I will say that.

[00:55:50]

Eric Velasco: It’s at least a food memory for a lot of people.

[00:55:52]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. I mean, it’s historic. Whether you sell twenty or 200, it’s just a great thing.

[00:55:57]

Eric Velasco: Now, were they more common back in ’61, ’62?

[00:56:01]

Sam Nakos: I think they were more well-known, because everybody walks in and says, “That’s how my grandmother used to make it. That’s how my grandmother used to make it.” I hear that a lot. I’ve heard it a lot throughout my life. So for some reason, grandmothers used to make these things.

[00:56:21]

Eric Velasco: Do you know how it came to be on El Rancho’s menu?

[00:56:24]

Sam Nakos: I do not know. I do not know. God, that’s a great question.

[00:56:30]

Eric Velasco: So dissatisfaction with the partnership led him to be looking for another opportunity.

[00:56:38]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. So he put us all into Mountain Brook. Built a house in Mountain Brook.

[Interviewer’s note: Mountain Brook is a well-to-do suburban municipality south of Birmingham.]

I mean, that’s how confident he was, and that’s how he built that business. It was strong, and he went ahead and took some risks. Built a house in Mountain Brook, and the fire chief helped him build it. My dad was best friends with this man named Chief Al Evans, and, as a child, he reminded me of Andy Griffith, you know. This was like a Mayberry to me, and Andy was Chief Evans. Chief helped build this restaurant that we’re in right now, Demetri’s, and he built the house in Mountain Brook. So they were best buddies, and Chief Evans had a skill outside of putting out fires. Most of the firemen have redone our barbecue pit. They were brick masons on the side. And Chief Evans was a house builder on the side. So talked Chief into building the house and building this restaurant, and they were best friends.

And Dad was very confident. So he didn’t like the partner, he outworked him. And I’m going to say he was lazy. And as he was successful, he came over. The time was right, and he came up to this piece of property and built a bigger, better—and still not that big—and he called it Demetri’s. That partner went away, we never heard from him again, but Dad started a whole new future and life here.

[00:58:07]

Eric Velasco: How far away is Demetri’s from the old El Rancho?

[00:58:09]

Sam Nakos: One block. One block. Literally 200—well, would you say 200 feet from here back there? Less than a block. Out my back door less than a block, because we’ve cut out almost half the block.

[00:58:24h]

Eric Velasco: And he got to know these fellows because City Hall, the fire department, police department were next door?

[00:58:31]

Sam Nakos: Yes. God, great—back to how it all came together. City Hall was next door to the El Rancho, and that was the cafe next to the El Rancho. So, I mean, you have the people in the small town of Homewood, the Mayberry-ish town, coming over to eat at the cafe El Rancho. And here’s this Greek man that owns it, and they’re eating barbecue and drinking coffee, and the waitress is waiting on them and bringing them eggs in the morning and sandwiches in the afternoon. He knew all the firemen, because it was all in one spot. City Hall was a City Hall with the firemen and the police all in one building, until they—now, they built that police station across the street where it is now, but that was a Jack’s. That was the original Jack’s Hamburger for nineteen cents in the sixties. A guy named Jack Caddell, historically, kind of opened up a bunch of restaurants here, and he started Jack’s. So there was Jack’s Hamburgers for nineteen

cents. Across the street, the City Hall, fire department, police department, then Dad’s El Rancho.

[00:59:48]

Eric Velasco: Where you could get beef for thirty five cents, I think it was?

[00:59:52]

Sam Nakos: Probably, yeah. Yeah, you’re right. A hamburger for nineteen, and then we would probably be thirty five. [*Laughs*]

[00:59:57]

Eric Velasco: Not bad. So did he have the same sort of limited menu, your dad, when he opened up here?

[01:00:12]

Sam Nakos: Yes, limited, limited, limited menu. My dad didn’t see that coming, the fact that we have to expand. And that’s the younger generation’s responsibility, and I lived up to it. I did not change my father’s ways of doing things. I mentored under him. But when I saw other restaurants moving in, and, like I said, these newcomers, the Johnny Ray’s, the Jim ‘N Nick’s, they were coming and they were adding this and adding that. I said, “We’re going to have to add baked beans to the menu, Dad.” And we had like salad and fries. And Dad was very proud of his Greek dressing, and all the other dressings he bought out of a gallon plastic—I was like, “No, Dad, I’m sorry, but we’re going to have add baked beans, and we’re going to have to change.

People want more salad dressings.” I *love* the simplicity and I love the limited menu, but we had to get competitive.

[01:01:19]

Eric Velasco: How hard was it to get your dad to adjust to the changing tastes as well as the changes necessitated by competition?

[01:01:25]

Sam Nakos: Well, I think he was okay with the taste of everything. I think his—

[01:01:32]

Eric Velasco: What I meant by changing tastes, that have more people eating salads, wanting different ingredients. You added chicken. You added turkey.

[01:01:41]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. Well, can you imagine a restaurant without Ranch dressing? I mean, that’s almost—you can’t even imagine that today.

[01:01:48]

Eric Velasco: So did you have to drag him kicking and screaming?

[01:01:52]

Sam Nakos: Well, my dad was very, very—I like it, though, about him. He had been so successful with what he had, and when you’re so successful and things are going good, you don’t—you know, change could be your enemy.

[01:02:11]

Eric Velasco: If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

[01:02:12]

Sam Nakos: That’s right. And you are always making decisions not to change. You’re always trying to preserve. That’s what we do here a lot. We don’t go with the—I mean, you know, the answer to everything is not social media, the answer is flavor in that food, and I’m not going down that road. And I didn’t go down this road. Dad taught me all that, but there is a time when Dad has to understand things are changing and competition is coming, and we had to change. So we added—in answer to your question, he didn’t like it. But the baked beans recipe, I nailed it for the first, oh, must have been twenty years. We just kept getting compliments on our baked beans.

[01:02:52]

Eric Velasco: Did he ever come around?

[01:02:53]

Sam Nakos: Well, my dad—I know where you’re going with this. My dad would *never* look at me and say, “Sam, that was a great decision.” And to this day, I don’t use the G-word very often. I don’t think that it’s good sometimes to let Icarus fly too high to the sun. So I think he saw that in me and he tempered that, but there were times I think he took it a little too far.

[01:03:26]

Eric Velasco: Very Greek analogy there.

[01:03:28]

Sam Nakos: You’re right. [*Laughs*] There you go.

[01:03:34]

Eric Velasco: So tell me a little bit about the clientele that your father built and the kinds of relationships he had with them. We mentioned that some of them would be some of the ones invited over to the veranda for meals, but tell me about the interaction that he would have.

[*To-go window bell rings*]

[01:03:49]

Sam Nakos: My father had a side to him that loved people. He’d come in at eight o’clock in the morning and he would walk around and pour coffee. He liked that part of it. I don’t like that part of it. He was a morning guy. He would wake up five-thirty. I remember our neighbor next

door, he’d knock on the door, “Come on, let’s go for a walk,” and he made my neighbor walk two miles with him. He would walk two or three miles at Mountain Brook High School every day before work.

[01:04:16]

Eric Velasco: Before he’d spend all day walking around the restaurant.

[01:04:18]

Sam Nakos: Oh, god, I’m such not a morning person. I just don’t even want to talk in the morning. But he was up, and he liked pouring coffee for all of his customers. He liked the interaction. They loved him. They had a nickname for him, Eric. His name was Demetri, but nobody called him Demetri. Well, the Greek community did, some of them, formally. His name was Mr. Jimmy. Mr. Jimmy, that’s what his name was.

[01:04:47]

Eric Velasco: Because of the James?

[01:04:48]

Sam Nakos: Because of the James. And everybody called him—even Barbara, who just sat at that chair just then. She’s been with us forty-four years. She left for the interview. “Mr. Jimmy, Mr. Jimmy, Mr. Jimmy, Mr. Jimmy.” Everybody called him Mr. Jimmy. Or Jimmy. But he also had a nickname for his close, close friends, and that was Tyki.

[01:05:08]

Eric Velasco: What was that?

[01:05:11]

Sam Nakos: Tyki is like what they called him in Greece. It’s Demetri and Demetryki. And you take the “yki” at the end, means like Jim, Jimmy, you add the little “y” at the end, and it makes small. Like Bill, Billy. William would be Demetri, Bill would be Jimmy, and Tyki would be that last little cozy little nickname that they fondly gave him. And only his inner circle of friends called him Tyki. That’s cool, isn’t it?

[01:05:49]

Eric Velasco: That is very cool. Now, was it something where he—how did they figure this out?

[01:05:53]

Sam Nakos: Well, that’s what everybody called him. He’d go to Greece and they called him Demetri and Tyki. Everybody knows him as Tyki. When he’d go to Greece, he was like an ambassador. He’d walk down the streets, and they’d say, “There’s Tyki from that little village who moved to America and has a restaurant.” I mean, you’re talking about island people that can’t get off this island, and my dad was brave enough to do it. They all called him Demetri or Tyki. And “Jimmy,” he gave that to people, but I don’t know. He had three names. [laughter]

[01:06:33]

Eric Velasco: You were growing up here during the Civil Rights Movement at a time of integration here in Birmingham. What was your childhood like? And part of what I want to get into also is how were the Greeks viewed in this black-and-white world then?

[01:07:00]

Sam Nakos: I don’t think we’re viewed at all in it. I don’t remember any—I know we had a lot of black employees, and I hired a lot of white and black, but we had a lot of black employees. We were fifty-fifty here, you know. Rosedale’s right up the road, so we had a lot of people come in and apply for the dish-washing job and cooks and—

[01:07:27]

Eric Velasco: And just for listeners, Rosedale is a black community in Homewood.

[01:07:30]

Sam Nakos: That is. That’s exactly right. Rosedale, I’m sorry. But we didn’t really—there was no participation in that at all. I don’t really remember any of that. I just remember we had two kinds of employees here, blacks and whites, and I was raised hiring both, but the waitresses—so as far as your question goes, civil rights never played into anything that we were doing. I don’t really remember it.

[01:08:05]

Eric Velasco: Did your school integrate while you were in—

[01:08:08]

Sam Nakos: There was not a black person that went to Mountain Brook.

[01:08:09]

Eric Velasco: That’s right, because you’d gone to Mountain Brook, right.

[01:08:10]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, I was in Mountain Brook, and I was down here—

[01:08:11]

Eric Velasco: Until the athletic program got desperate.

[01:08:14]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly. Well—

[01:08:19]

Eric Velasco: It seems to have been the main integrating factor in the southern suburbs.

[01:08:21]

Sam Nakos: Exactly.

[01:08:22]

Eric Velasco: That and green flight.

[01:08:23]

Sam Nakos: Exactly. But I don’t really know what was going on downtown. I’m trying to wrack my brain. I don’t remember much of that. But I do remember one thing, if I may, one thing about the waitresses. It was a different world back then with the waitresses. You know the old diner waitresses? These were forty-eight- to fifty-eight-, sixty-year-old waitresses, and they were career people, and they were sticking with you for life. I mean, we had four or five here that just—the longevity was just unbelievable. They were waitresses. And then something changed where the—and it was females. Something changed where the females don’t want to be servers anymore. They didn’t. I can’t really explain it. Maybe you know. But all the kids started to apply for servers, and I was stuck with younger, younger, younger.

And these waitresses Dad had back in the day, they were professionals, professional waitresses. They would come in and say, “I’m a waitress. I’m a waitress.” Okay. “Would you like for me to wear a uniform tomorrow?” They’d wear their uniform. They’d come in and they had their own style and they knew how to serve. We never had a training program. Now I have to train people how to serve, but we didn’t have training. We just threw them out there. “You’re a waitress? Okay, go. There’s your tables.” [*Laughs*] It’s changed, because now it’s younger kids. I mean, we have a twenty-year-old—we have an eighteen-year-old working for us, serving, and a twenty-year-old.

[01:10:12]

Eric Velasco: As opposed to somebody who’s been serving for eighteen years.

[01:10:13]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. We’re talking about a fifty-five-year-old woman that is working. I’ve gotten so much older; I thought they were old when I was younger. But fifty-five-, sixty-year-old woman that was a professional waitress show up to work every day. You will not see a sixty-year-old woman out there waiting tables. I don’t know why. I mean, do you know why?

[01:10:34]

Eric Velasco: I have no idea.

[01:10:36]

Sam Nakos: I have no idea. I wish they *would* apply, because I like—they bring in the old-school mentality. They bring in the—

[01:10:46]

Eric Velasco: Experience and maturity.

[01:10:47]

Sam Nakos: And then you have experience with it. “Yeah, I worked twenty years down at John’s Restaurant.” I’m mentioning restaurants that have historically been here forever.

[01:10:58]

Eric Velasco: Did you ever have many Greeks working here?

[01:11:02]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. My dad always had a Greek cook, and Theo, Theodore, was our Greek cook, and he was the meat man and he was the guy that was the number one guy in the kitchen. So, yes, we had Theodore my whole life.

[01:11:18]

Eric Velasco: And that even went back to the El Rancho days, too, right?

[01:11:23]

Sam Nakos: Yes. Theo worked at the El Rancho and he worked at Demetri’s.

[01:11:27]

Eric Velasco: So it wasn’t so much a succession of Greeks, but rather one guy came and, like so many others, stayed.

[01:11:33]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. There’s one guy that came. I’ve hired—I had my Greek man that worked for me for a while, but, no, not a lot of Greeks have worked here. They really haven’t. I can’t explain why. Usually, you know, they’re in the hot dog business or they’re doing something, you know.

[01:11:55]

Eric Velasco: And a lot of times it’s relatives who are coming over.

[01:11:57]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. I just remember Theo my whole life.

[01:12:01]

Eric Velasco: What’s Theo’s last name?

[01:12:03]

Sam Nakos: Chrysombolis.

[01:12:05]

Eric Velasco: Would you spell that for me, please?

[01:12:05]

Sam Nakos: C-h-r-y-s-o-m-b-o-l-i-s.

[01:12:16]

Eric Velasco: Is he U.S.-born or Greek-born?

[01:12:17]

Sam Nakos: Greek.

[01:12:17]

Eric Velasco: From where?

[01:12:19]

Sam Nakos: I don’t know. Where they have thick, heavy accents. [*Laughs*]

[01:12:22]

Eric Velasco: A regional accent you don’t recognize?

[01:12:25]

Sam Nakos: Oh, my gosh, yes. He was Greek. They didn’t even bother learning a new word for thirty years, you know. They don’t even care. They just put together words after a while.

[01:12:36]

Eric Velasco: Now, your barbecue sauce came via your mother’s side of the family.

[01:12:40]

Sam Nakos: My Uncle Gus—okay, here we go with Uncle Gus. Here we go. We’re not going down—this is not that one. This is another one. We’re not going down the family tree. But my mother’s side, who she came to visit that day, that time when she met my father, they had a basic recipe. And Dad mentioned to him that he may go in the barbecue business, and I think he said—I’m just putting a little bit of this together—“You have a basic barbecue recipe. Here it is.”

But my dad was good with sauces. He was good. You’re asking about my dad and why he cooked so good. Some people just have a great palate, but I don’t know. I still don’t know how to answer that question. But my dad did have—he was good. When he went into his

laboratory, and like I have to do, and mixed those spices, he would work on it until he got the spices right. He worked on the sauce. It’s the basic recipe and he added more to it, but it’s been the same recipe. In fact, I think I’m the only person that knows it. I make it.

[01:13:42]

Eric Velasco: And it’s more of a traditional southern-style barbecue. How would you describe it?

[01:13:48]

Sam Nakos: Well, the way I describe it is tradition started when we started making it. *[Laughs]* I mean, in a way, because we made that red tomato sauce in Birmingham, we helped make it traditional. Yes, it was before my father, so, yes, it was traditional, but people can’t go back that far in their heads, so I like to take them back to when there were three sauces in Birmingham. And this is why I rebel the white sauce with passion, because, historically, pizza was made in Italy, you know. You don’t say pizza was made in Canada. But, anyway. There was Golden Rule sauce, Demetri sauce, and Ollie’s sauce, which was a vinegary sauce. Did you ever eat there? I don’t know if you ever ate there?

[01:14:44]

Eric Velasco: Never have, no, sir.

[01:14:45]

Sam Nakos: Okay. So you’re younger than me. But it was a lighter, more vinegary sauce. You can still buy it today. Mr. P., Pillitteri, bought Ollie’s sauce and he distributes it. You can still buy it today. Ours was a red sauce, zesty tomato-based sauce. Golden Rule’s was the same thing. As you sell that sauce in the sixties, two places in Birmingham that sell the sauce, and Birmingham was small back then. There was no Galleria, and everybody came through Demetri’s. Everybody came through Demetri’s and everybody came through El Rancho. *Everybody* did. You established what historically *is* the Birmingham barbecue sauce. It just happens.

[01:15:39]

Eric Velasco: Just like a Memphis or a Kansas City.

[01:15:41]

Sam Nakos: Yes. It just happens, like there’s no—

[01:15:43]

Eric Velasco: Carolina mustard or whatever.

[01:15:43]

Sam Nakos: That’s right. Carolina mustard or the vinegary sauce or the mayonnaise-y white sauce. It just happens. If you stick in there long enough—and we’ve been doing it fifty-six years—the first twenty or thirty, it only takes thirty or forty, you know, that’s all, to establish that

tradition, and especially when there’s not many restaurants. Now there’s fifty, sixty barbecue places all over here, but there were literally three. Then Van Sykes had his way out in Bessemer, but that was another city back then, although don’t tell Jimmy and Nicky Koikos that.

[laughter]

[01:16:19]

Eric Velasco: They’re over at The Bright Star. [Interviewer’s note: The Bright Star has been under Greek ownership since it was established in 1907.]

[01:16:20]

Sam Nakos: That’s right, The Bright Star boys.

[01:16:22]

Eric Velasco: So really that kind of became the Birmingham style, and as places opened up afterward, you would see more going in toward that approach.

[01:16:32]

Sam Nakos: That’s right.

[01:16:40]

Eric Velasco: What was your aunt’s and her husband’s name?

[01:16:44]

Sam Nakos: Their last name was Poulos, spelled P-o-u-l-o-s. She had a nickname. I don’t know what her official name was. We just called her “Aunt.”

[*Telephone interruption*]

[01:17:07]

Eric Velasco: What did you call her?

[01:17:08]

Sam Nakos: We just called her “Aunt.” Her name was—we called her Aunt Pepissa [phonetic], which was a nickname, a Greek nickname. It sounds like pizza, but it wasn’t. It had nothing to do with pizza.

[01:17:17]

Eric Velasco: What does that mean in Greek?

[01:17:18]

Sam Nakos: I don’t know. We just taught to say her name, and we said it. [*Laughs*] Mother called her that, Dad called her that, and it must be some nickname somehow. I have no idea. I’m going to ask that question.

[01:17:30]

Eric Velasco: I assume it’s spelled with an s as opposed to z, too?

[01:17:32]

Sam Nakos: Probably. I’m going to ask that question, but there’s a lot of strange names in the Greek community.

[01:17:40]

Eric Velasco: When we talk again, I want to know what it means.

[01:17:42]

Sam Nakos: You want to know. Okay, yeah.

[01:17:43]

Eric Velasco: Please.

[01:17:44]

Sam Nakos: Okay.

[01:17:45]

Eric Velasco: So let’s see here. How often would you come in when you were in elementary school? Did you have junior high back then?

[01:17:57]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, we had junior high.

[01:17:58]

Eric Velasco: And then back in high school, how often would you work in here?

[01:18:02]

Sam Nakos: I worked summers. I remember working off and on, off and on, off and on, but I remember working two summers in high school. There’s one summer I told my dad—I was rebellious, I guess, or just trying to find some individuality.

[01:18:17]

Eric Velasco: Those were the times.

[01:18:18]

Sam Nakos: Those were the times. I told my dad, “Dad, I’m not working.” And he was okay with it, you know. He didn’t force me. “I’m not working this summer. I’m going to paint houses with my friend.” And I forget his name. Anyway, he lived about a block away. He decided to paint a few houses, I guess. So we high-schoolers were out there painting houses. Ridiculous. We didn’t know what we were doing.

[01:18:44]

Eric Velasco: People *hiring* high-schoolers to paint their houses, that’s even more ridiculous.

[*Laughs*]

[01:18:49]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. Well, he was my age. Lee Condrey was his name. He decided to become “Mr. Businessman” at seventeen-year-old, and so we joined on and he hired us at an hourly wage. But, I mean, it was something I didn’t have to go to the restaurant for.

[01:19:06]

Eric Velasco: Do you think your dad had you in mind at that point to take over?

[01:19:11]

Sam Nakos: Oh, yeah.

[01:19:12]

Eric Velasco: Do you think it’s one of those things where he’s letting you go out and try other things so you would know this is it?

[01:19:17]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, of course, you know. Dean never got the part, my younger brother. We never got to Dean because I came in and I did it. And George, that wasn’t going to work, like I said. But Dean was filtered out. I was in there, and they didn’t force me. When I did commit,

once I did commit, my ass was over here and working, and that’s when it got—it was serious. I mean, we had to roll up the sleeves and get to work. But until that point, it was okay.

[01:19:57]

Eric Velasco: This was, what, 1980 when you [unclear]?

[01:19:59]

Sam Nakos: 1980, yeah.

[01:20:01]

Eric Velasco: And you were twenty then.

[01:20:03]

Sam Nakos: I was twenty, mm-hmm.

[01:20:04]

Eric Velasco: We’re only a few months apart.

[01:20:07]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, okay.

[01:20:10]

Eric Velasco: So early on, what was the division of labor?

[To-go window bell rings]

[01:20:18]

Sam Nakos: Start off as busboy. Is that what you’re asking?

[01:20:20]

Eric Velasco: Yeah, or how would it work between you and your dad as the partnership started?

[01:20:24]

Sam Nakos: I would clock in. You’re not special treated. Hit the clock. Back then we had the card clock. I don’t know if people can even remember that. That’s so crazy. But we’d take a little card down into a machine and it would punch. Then we’d put it back on a rack. Go wash dishes. Then occasionally when Theo went on vacation, “Sam, come up for three weeks.” Theo took a two-week vacation, I think, every year. “Sam, you’re the meat cutter for the two weeks. Come up and cut meat.” So I’d go up there and cut meat. And that was what I can’t understand when I look at the fact that I—if I had kids, I would love for them to get in this business, because I know what it did for me. It helped me. But I can’t—I mean, I look back and think he was not easy on me. I would be so easy on my kids. I say I would be, but I knew I couldn’t be.

[01:21:29]

Eric Velasco: Do you think it’s a generational thing? I mean, he had a pretty tough life growing up.

[01:21:35]

Sam Nakos: I think it was generational thing. You know, a good dose of work, a good work, I say it purifies you, makes you think, appreciate the value of money. You have to earn it. You have to save it, you have to work hard for it, and you have to be a leader to them, tell them they have to work. I mean, my payroll goes up if I just give them raises all the time, and then I don’t make any money. But you have to work, and Dad was absolutely never—he just never had a—he did occasionally. I will say this. I wanted to start taking Wednesdays off and work five-day workweeks, and I talked to Mom about it, and we tried to negotiate with Dad. But I was at fifty, fifty-five, sixty hours anyway a week. But I did everything, Eric. I mean, I didn’t call people in to do stuff. I’d just be up there and I’d prepare stuff, walk around, clean stuff, be on ladders, wait on people, get off the ladder, wait on people. Wow!

[01:22:43]

Eric Velasco: Well, you have to do that at some level as a business owner.

[01:22:45]

Sam Nakos: Yes.

[01:22:46]

Eric Velasco: But that sounds also very old-school Greek too.

[01:22:48]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, yeah. I liked it. I like where I came from. I look back now and I think it was an opportunity. I like it. I look back now and just think that’s the way to go.

[01:23:02]

Eric Velasco: Do you think you inherited your dad’s work ethic or did you learn it the way you learned to cook from him?

[01:23:08]

Sam Nakos: I embraced it and got near the fire and felt it, and it became part of me, because I was—you don’t know this about me, but all I wanted to do is play guitar my whole life. So I started playing guitar at fifteen. I see myself as an artistic person who had to develop the other side of the brain, and I developed that. I modeled it, I was shown it my whole life. I looked at it. My dad had me do this, then you make the deposit, then you go to the bank, and then, you know, it was structure, structure, structure. You know, pretty soon it became me. I thought like a businessman. I had to rethink the way I thought. I guess it’s like an exercise in your head. You become what you do.

[01:24:12]

Eric Velasco: Do you still play guitar?

[01:24:13]

Sam Nakos: Yes, I still play guitar.

[01:24:15]

Eric Velasco: What do you like to play?

[01:24:17]

Sam Nakos: Well, I have a studio, home studio. I write. That’s why I loved your mic when you showed me that Rode mic. I have a Rode mic also, and I was working on it last night in my studio because it didn’t work, but I got it working. But I want to borrow that mic one day.

I have a home studio and I record instrumental music that I write, and I’ve been working on this CD project for five years. It takes me a long time. I just write instrumental-type stuff, produce it myself. I’m involved with a lot of programs, computer programs. I was one of the first—I think I *was* the first person in Birmingham to do digital audio recording. There’s one guy who says he was before me, but he used a very primitive—he’s a customer of mine, because I told him that, and he said, “No, I was before you.” And I was like, “Oh, all right. Whatever.”

[01:25:19]

Eric Velasco: How much involvement did you have with the Greek church growing up and in adulthood too?

[01:25:24]

Sam Nakos: Well, I liked it. I was a choirboy, and we went. But I will say this, I went to a Young Life meeting one night and I got converted. [Interviewer’s note: Young Life is a non-denominational Christian ministry.]

I had so much fun, the guitars and how much fun they were having, you know. The Greek church, is like unveiling an antique. It’s just old and it’s all in Greek and it’s preserved, and its liturgy is—I mean, I can’t explain it.

[01:26:09]

Eric Velasco: It’s otherworldly.

[01:26:10]

Sam Nakos: It’s another world.

[01:26:11]

Eric Velasco: I’ve been to some Greek Orthodox services, and it is otherworldly.

[01:26:13]

Sam Nakos: It’s just like, “Sam, let’s go to the museum one more time.” You know?

“Do we have to? Can we go to the rock concert or go to the guy playing the guitar?”

So I embraced this Young Life thing and I fell in love with it, and it changed my life. And about that time, I started loving playing the guitar and music. I went skiing with them, because we learned how to ski at an early age, and I went skiing three years in a row with Young Life for a week, and I became a pretty good skier throughout my life, snow-ski in Colorado. And I became a Young Life leader when I was twenty-eight.

So I saw both sides of the church. I saw the non-church, the exciting evangelical approach where you invite everybody from high school to the Young Life meeting and you say,

“We’re going to do this funny thing. I think John’s going to eat a goldfish,” or something like that, and get everybody to come. And then you present the Gospel very nicely and very, very short at the end, and you find out if they’re interested. And I just—it changed my life. I developed—Eric, I had so many friends, so many people. We did stuff together. Kept me out of trouble, although I did get in some trouble.

[01:27:40]

Eric Velasco: Well, that seemed to have been an important part of keeping the community cohesive and together. A lot of couples met at the church.

[01:27:49]

Sam Nakos: Mm-hmm.

[01:27:51]

Eric Velasco: But also it sounded like the things you were doing across state lines, too, was part of that whole kind of—

[01:27:57]

Sam Nakos: Well, that’s true. Can you imagine? I’m a blend of Greek conventions of the most old, antiquated church, and then I have this other side, which was “Let’s go snow-skiing with all your buddies in high school, and let’s go get crazy, and let’s go to these Young Life meetings and have fun.” That also was a new way to present the Gospel to kids, and it was a free, freer way to understand it, partake in it, decide if you’re interested, read the Bible on your own. But,

like I said, then you go to the Greek church and everything’s in Greek. But I love the people. It was a dichotomy my whole life. I love the Greek people. I wanted to go to church just to talk to people. I mean, I didn’t get much out of the liturgy, but I loved that whole thing. And I love going to Greece. I love all my cousins, but then I had this other world over here. And then I had the guitar world, which I was learning how to play Christian music, too, which some people never even knew existed.

[01:29:05]

Eric Velasco: And then the quintessential southern barbecue.

[01:29:07]

Sam Nakos: And then the barbecue, the restaurant business. I’m a very confused person.

[laughter]

[01:29:13]

Eric Velasco: Eclectic.

[01:29:13]

Sam Nakos: Eclectic, that’s a better word for “confused.” [*Laughs*] No, I’m really not confused. You evoke the fact that I was, my whole life, dangling with one foot here and one foot there, trying to figure out which one to go to. Not that I had to go to one, but I partook in both and I loved them both.

[01:29:38]

Eric Velasco: How has the prevalence or the impact of Greek restaurateurs in the city changed, especially over your lifetime?

[01:29:51]

Sam Nakos: I don’t know. I think it’s still there. I think it’s still there, because I go see Teddy down at Niki’s [West], and his dad got him on the restaurateur track. Now, he needs to go to Greece. His dad was from Greece. He needs to take a vacation. I’ve tried to tell him that. But he is hardcore down there, doing that. And, you know, you look around—of course, I remember John’s Restaurant, and I remember the Niki’s and the other Niki’s [Downtown] and then all these—La Patee was owned—people do not remember that. I took a friend downtown and showed him the La Patee, which used to sell lamb on 20th Street and—what is that? What’s near Lin Park?

[01:30:31]

Eric Velasco: Fifth.

[01:30:32]

Sam Nakos: Fifth. That’s that main corner, and Greek—

[01:30:35]

Eric Velasco: That was Matsos, wasn’t it?

[01:30:38]

Sam Nakos: You know, I don’t—Matsos, Matsos, Matsos? No, Matsos had the Golden Rule. I’m trying to think. I can’t remember.

[01:30:47]

Eric Velasco: Bill Demoes was running that for a long time. [Interviewer’s note: Michael Matsos took over the LaParee restaurant in the 1948 with Bill Demoes as a partner. Matsos sold the downtown Birmingham restaurant in 1953 to Demoes, who ran it until he sold it in 1981.]

[01:30:50]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, they did sell it a couple times. I knew the guy at the La Paree because I was a kid and my dad took me down there. I can’t remember his name. But then you had Andy’s On the Green. You had all these famous restaurants.

I’ll tell you another one, if you can remember, is in Vestavia—was it Joe’s, the club that was there? You joined a club. This guy had a restaurant club. It was Gus Gulas, and it was— not Gus’ Supper Club, but—god, I can’t remember the name of his restaurant. I was talking about it the other day. It was so cool because you joined a membership, and you could bring— BYOB. You could bring your own liquor in there, and as you were a member—he had the membership thing before Sam’s Club had it. [Interviewer’s note: Mr. Nakos likely is referring to Gulas Supper Club, a private dining club that opened in the early 1950s in northeast Birmingham.]

But, no, in answer to your question, Greeks are still here. They're still doing the restaurant businesses. There are still a few hot dog places downtown that are Greek-owned. They're still in it.

[01:31:45]

Eric Velasco: One of the changes I'm seeing, though, is that it seems like the immigrants are starting to give way more to the U.S.-born children such as yourself.

[01:32:00]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, okay, okay. I see where you're coming on that. The Greek immigrants?

[01:32:06]

Eric Velasco: Right, people like George Sarris, starting to turn over to his son Dino. The old-line guys, Pete Koutroulakis and all those kind of people.

[01:32:15]

Sam Nakos: Yeah.

[01:32:16]

Eric Velasco: Now it's Ernie instead of Spiro.

[01:32:19]

Sam Nakos: That's right. Exactly right. It's up to people like me to keep it going. You know, that's a great question, because I guess what you're asking is after my generation, are people still doing the Greek restaurant thing. Maybe so. But I have the benefit of mentoring under a first-generation Greek. Do they have the benefit of mentoring under second-generation Greek born in the United States? Can that be something that would enhance their business if they took it over from somebody like me or the children of these immigrants? I don't know.

[01:33:02]

Eric Velasco: You seem to feel a responsibility, though, to perpetuate what your dad built.

[01:33:08]

Sam Nakos: It's a marriage. If you don't look at it—it's a marriage. I have to stand here and this is my house, this is my life. You know, I don't know if I could do anything else, you know. I'm not going to go—if I don't have this, what do I have? I mean, you know, this is it. And I've created a little family inside here. We have employees. I mean, I got to Greece and I go at Christmas and I want to come back to work. I mean, sometimes I feel like the people I can talk to are here. They're people I've hired. *[Laughs]* And they feel the same way too. I mean, it's just like you go into this family thing. I say spending eight grueling hours with people you love, and then you want to come back to work, but, you know, even some of the Mexican employees I have now, they've been with me seven, eight years, and we talk and we work.

[01:34:08]

Eric Velasco: That's another change that's happened during your tenure—

[01:34:10]

Sam Nakos: It's just us. Oh, my gosh, yeah, it's totally another change.

[01:34:12]

Eric Velasco: We're not just black, white, and Greek anymore.

[01:34:14]

Sam Nakos: We are not. And I work with them so good. I work with them, communicate to them, and I have some of them, I mean, oh, my gosh, they're so unbelievable. There's one of them, if you could meet him, you'd give him stuff. He's just so—never says a word, never complains, works, quiet. It's just crazy.

[01:34:41]

Eric Velasco: Do you think being the son of an immigrant helps form your thinking on that kind of thing, especially because it is such a big issue today?

[01:34:51]

Sam Nakos: Do I think my being the son of an immigrant helps me relate to them? Yeah. Yeah, I think the work ethic. I believe that they started working at ten years old. I started

working at eight. Of course, I went to Mountain Brook, played around, had a motorcycle, I lived a good life. These guys went to *work*.

[01:35:13]

Eric Velasco: They’re supporting families at eight.

[01:35:15]

Sam Nakos: Yes, they are. They’re walking around with bread on their head trying to sell it, or they’re shining shoes, or they’re doing something at ten years old. You know, when you get in there—now, my dad put me through it, and I can understand what they’re doing. It’s kind of like a—we’re reading each other’s minds at this point. My advice would get them going young. You can’t get these twenty-four-year-olds out of college like bubble boys, and, “Hey, I got a degree. I’m ready to make 70,000.”

And I’m like, “What have you done?”

“Well, I’ve got a degree. I went to school.”

I’m like—you know, thing is, you know, get your kids working. Let’s go. Let’s see it, you know. I’m sorry. I’ve just got to say that.

[01:36:04]

Eric Velasco: And if nothing else, you end up appreciating what you achieve all the more.

[01:36:07]

Sam Nakos: Yeah.

[01:36:10]

Eric Velasco: It’s probably at least a good motivator. “I don’t want to go back and wash dishes.”

[01:36:13]

Sam Nakos: [*Laughs*] Hey, you know what it’ll do? If you go back there and wash dishes, your day will change. You know why? Because you’ll see it differently. Everything you think of, everything you see out here, the nice car you drive and all, all of a sudden you go back to washing dishes, it all comes into a perspective, everything. I don’t want to go do it. I mean, I’m not going to go do it right now after this interview, but I’m just saying, perspective. I do have to cook. I have to get back behind that grill and go, and train people. So, perspective. It gets your perspective back.

[01:36:43]

Eric Velasco: That’s an important thing to have, no matter where you wind up.

[01:36:46]

Sam Nakos: Yeah.

[01:36:51]

Eric Velasco: When did y’all start selling bottled sauces and seasonings and things?

[01:36:55]

Sam Nakos: My mother tried to get the sauce business going a long time ago, and she figured out the bottles, and we had a little way to put them in the bottles, and she created a label. You know, there’s a lot of things to go through with that. You have to find the source for the bottles; you have to get a label; you have to send the sauce off to Auburn to be analyzed; you have to list the ingredients; you have to figure out a way to take the sauce and put it into the bottles. So she started that.

[01:37:28]

Eric Velasco: And you have to scale it.

[01:37:28]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. I think we just filled it up to a certain part on the neck. You know what I mean?

[01:37:33]

Eric Velasco: But scaling up the recipe is [unclear].

[01:37:36]

Sam Nakos: Oh, scale up the recipe, yeah, yeah, true. But that’s probably true back then. But, you know, we sold such so little of it, and we tried to get it started, and then my brother tried to take over, Dean, and Dad—we had another label. You know, this was back in the day when the Brunos owned all the grocery stores. This is a whole ‘nother world now.

[01:38:01]

Eric Velasco: About when would that have been?

[01:38:03]

Sam Nakos: I’m going to say seventies and maybe even eighties. You could actually go—Dad could make a phone call to Joe Bruno and say—and Brunos owned—Bruno’s would be like Publix now and Western combined, wouldn’t you say? I would say. There wasn’t a lot of competition. There was a Winn-Dixie and Bruno’s. You could call Joe Bruno on that phone and say, “Joe, I want you to start selling my sauce in your stores.”

He goes, “All right, Demetri. Bring me about twenty cases or ten cases.”

And Dad would send Dean to take ten cases down there. I was busy with the restaurant. I didn’t want anything to do with it. But now—

[01:38:47]

Eric Velasco: If I could step in for a second. So this would have been substantially before you were seeing all these other barbecue folks—

[01:38:55]

Sam Nakos: That’s the best point.

[01:38:56]

Eric Velasco: —bottling their sauces and seasonings. Now everybody’s doing it.

[01:39:00]

Sam Nakos: Now, that's the best point, and the point I didn't make, which I should have. You're exactly right. Cattleman's comes in. Kraft comes in. Heinz comes in. They're jumping on it and they want shelf space. And how do you go get shelf space when you're competing with Heinz, who has forty more items in your grocery store? So here's that shelf, and you're right up there next to these brilliant people at Heinz, brilliant people at Cattleman's, or brilliant people at—you know, all these—Kraft. You've got to compete with Kraft. Okay? Yeah, okay. Well, you can, and I know you can. We're trying to. We did, and we wanted to. But that was the window of opportunity to get into the stores and try to get it in. Now it's very hard to get shelf space, because it's gone from ten, five, to five hundred, I mean, or fifty, let's just say, but about a hundred different sauces.

[01:39:59]

Eric Velasco: And not to mention locally. You've got Ollie's doing their sauces. You've got Full Moon doing their sauces.

[01:40:02]

Sam Nakos: Oh, man, people in the real estate business started doing the sauce in their basement, I mean. You've got people that are—I have a guy that comes in here, he's the greatest guy in the world, nice guy. He's a pharmaceutical rep who likes to grill out in his backyard. He has *his* sauces. I'm telling you, everybody's the master of the grill in their backyard. They're the commander, the king, you know, and they come up with their sauce and their special thing. And I don't know. More power to them. I think it's great.

[01:40:32]

Eric Velasco: So you’re still marketing these?

[01:40:34]

Sam Nakos: Yes, we are. We are. It’s on the shelves.

[01:40:36]

Eric Velasco: Online? On the shelves?

[01:40:38]

Sam Nakos: No, we don’t have it online. You have to go to Publix, go to Western, and it’s distributed through a local distributor, Mr. Pillitteri, who owns Mr. P’s. [Interviewer’s note: Mr. P’s is a butcher shop and deli in suburban Hoover. Pillitteri also has a line of seasonings.]

[01:40:47]

Eric Velasco: Is he Greek?

[01:40:48]

Sam Nakos: He’s not. He’s Italian.

[01:40:50]

Eric Velasco: That’s what I thought.

[01:40:50]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, he’s Italian, and he does a local homegrown kind of a distribution of products that are local, and he also throws his own in there, of course. But that’s it on the sauce business. I’m not really pursuing that as much as I don’t think it’s—I like serving people, waiting on people, getting people in here. They’re eating my breakfast, they’re eating my—and I went to some specials and I’ve added a few things to the menu. I want to make the ultimate salad, you know. I’m here just tweaking.

[01:41:25]

Eric Velasco: You have probably one of the more extensive vegetable offerings of any barbecue place I’ve seen.

[01:41:32]

Sam Nakos: Well, since this is the only unit—and this is my place—I see people eating in here. I mean, it’s not unusual, if you hung out here, people come for breakfast and then back at lunch. Come for breakfast, back at lunch. Some people are even embarrassed. They say, “I ate in here yesterday for breakfast, yesterday for lunch, and now I’m back in here today for lunch.”

I’m like, “So? You can eat with me every meal.” We have people all—every morning, they have their own table, their own chair. They’re local. They know all the customers. “See you at Demetri’s.” They’re inside of this place like it’s culture. It’s crazy. So I decided—

[01:42:14]

Eric Velasco: It’s still Mayberry.

[01:42:15]

Sam Nakos: It’s still Mayberry.

[01:42:16]

Eric Velasco: I’ve been wracking my brain trying to remember the name of that diner there.

[01:42:18]

Sam Nakos: Oh, really? I have two customers that do imitations in here all the time of Howard and Goober and Gomer, and so I’ll ask them the cafe name. But I don’t know. [Interviewer’s note: It was the fictional Bluebird Diner.]

But on the vegetables, so I expanded. And I’m eating no bread, no sugar. I’m on one of those diets, too, so I like these veggies and I want to attract that crowd. I love having alternative things for people to eat that keep them on that low-carb diet or keep them on the no-sugar diet or high-protein diet, whatever they’re on. I like it.

[01:43:05]

Eric Velasco: These aren’t meat-seasoned vegetables either, are they? Are they something a vegetarian could come and eat?

[01:43:09]

Sam Nakos: Some of them are not meat-seasoned veggies.

[01:43:12]

Eric Velasco: Succotash?

[01:43:15]

Sam Nakos: The succotash, I think the succotash is meat-seasoned and the turnip greens are meat-seasoned, because I mean—

[01:43:23]

Eric Velasco: It’s hard not to. [*Laughs*]

[01:43:24]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. I love turnip greens, my goodness. But my green beans are not. The wood-fired vegetables are not. Some of the special veggies we do, Greek potatoes are not. Mashed potatoes we do. Okra, fried okra, it’s fried but it’s still vegetarian. So there’s a lot of things we do that don’t have any beef or chicken broth or anything in it.

[01:43:56]

Eric Velasco: You mention Greek potatoes. What kind of Greek things do you have on your menu?

[01:43:59]

Sam Nakos: Well, let me tell you something. I started the “Greek Omelette,” and if you ever see a Greek Omelette in Birmingham, you know it started because Sam started it, and people are

copying me a few places, I’ve noticed. I have to throw that in. But we do a Greek Omelette, which when you go to Greece, you’re probably not going to eat a Greek Omelette, but if you ever do order eggs, you’re going to get a Greek-style egg. They don’t do it the way we do it. They’re going to put different—they’re going to use olive oil.

We have a Greek Kebob Day, which was today, Wednesday, and we have Greek Potatoes on Tuesdays, and we have a Greek Salad, great feta cheese, great Greek dressings, our number one seller. Put the Greek dressing on all the salads, if you want. And we have a low-carb special, which has feta cheese, grilled chicken, caramelized onions, over slaw, and it has the Greek dressing all over it with a pepperoncini. What other Greek things do we have? That’s pretty much the bigger sellers.

[01:45:03]

Eric Velasco: Breakfast, that goes back to El Rancho days?

[01:45:05]

Sam Nakos: Yes, it does. My dad said, “If I’m going to stay here and cook meat early in the morning, I’m going to open those doors.” And he opened both of them, and people started coming in.

[01:45:14]

Eric Velasco: I would imagine the perfect place to be serving breakfast, too, with all those people working right across the way. In the case of the police and fire department, multiple shifts.

[01:45:24]

Sam Nakos: God, I mean, I know. That was a great decision. And, you know, not a lot of people want to go into a restaurant and be open fourteen and a half hours a day. They want to serve two meals and they want to get rich. But my dad wasn't afraid of work. "Hey, I'm open at six a.m. I'm going to be here working. We're going to serve breakfast, we're going to serve lunch, and we're going to serve dinner till nine o'clock at night." He was open till nine over there. We're open till eight-thirty now. So he opened the doors and there goes the fried eggs. We would do fried eggs, bacon, toast. I think we added biscuits later. You know, that was a simple breakfast.

[01:45:59]

Eric Velasco: Just like the simple lunch and dinner menu.

[01:46:02]

Sam Nakos: Simple, simple. And like I said, the menu's out there. We can take a look at it on the way out. But eggs, two over light, two over medium, two over easy, two over well. I think we had grits. We had toast, coffee. Simple. I like that menu.

[01:46:21]

Eric Velasco: What's in a Greek Omelette?

[01:46:23]

Sam Nakos: In my Greek Omelette, we take olive oil, and that gives it that nutty olive oil flavor, and we put feta cheese in it. And I’ll tell you what happened. One of my cousins, who was one of my best friends, we went out together one day. We found each other cooking eggs. He was cooking eggs for me somehow some way. He said, “I like my eggs cooked in olive oil. Do you?”

And so I said, “I’ve never tried them.”

So he takes the eggs, throws them in the olive oil, puts oregano on them, and we ate fried eggs. So you can get that here if you want. You can say “Greek style.” We’ll put olive oil, cook them in olive oil and throw oregano on them. And I like them over medium like that. It’s just good.

[01:47:06]

Eric Velasco: That sounds real good.

[01:47:07]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, you’re getting—I can see you’re getting hungry. [*Laughs*] You’ll have to join me for breakfast one day.

[01:47:12]

Eric Velasco: I need to. I definitely need to. So the *Playboy* named you—

[01:47:17]

Sam Nakos: *Playboy*, out of the blue, out of the blue. I was sitting here, I guess, what was it, three or four years ago, and I get a text from a buddy of mine downtown who sells cars.

“*Playboy* just voted you best breakfast.”

I said, “You know, that’s not even funny.” I think he was trying to be funny. “That’s not funny. You don’t talk about somebody’s restaurant and joke about it like that, you know. I’m serious here. I have a serious job.”

[01:47:48]

Eric Velasco: Well, the fact that he’s admitting he knew *Playboy* voted you number one, probably gave it some legitimacy.

[01:47:54]

Sam Nakos: No, I looked at it and thought it was a joke. I didn’t even—I looked at his text. Then I got another text or something. Then I hit the link on the text, and I was busy. I looked at it and I think it said “AL.com.” It didn’t send me to the *Playboy* website. Alabama.com wrote it up after that. So I told six people about it, and I said, “What the heck do you think this is?”

Come back to my office, sit on my computer. I go straight to the *Playboy* site. *Playboy* magazine—and I’m talking about, you have to understand—*Southern Living*—if I text my cousins in Greece that *Playboy* voted us number one breakfast in the Southeast, they know who *Playboy* is. They don’t know *Southern Living*.

[01:48:40]

Eric Velasco: They don’t subscribe to *Garden and Gun*?

[01:48:42]

Sam Nakos: Exactly. They don’t know anything about that. Everybody in the whole world knows *Playboy*. And so I looked at it—

[01:48:49]

Eric Velasco: For the record, what did they name you?

[01:48:52]

Sam Nakos: They named us the number one breakfast in the Southeast, and they had a star over this map in the city of Birmingham and it said “Demetri’s.” And nobody else in the whole state. And then they had down in—what’s the name of the beignet place in New Orleans?

[01:49:12]

Eric Velasco: Café du Monde.

[01:49:13]

Sam Nakos: Café du Monde. They had Café du Monde. I’m like, “What?” Then they had some famous breakfast places all over the Southeast, and I was like—nobody in Alabama, just Demetri’s. And I’m like, “Come here and look at this.” And I was like, “What?” I didn’t know what to do with it at first. Of course, I figured it out pretty quick. I’m going to go and run with

that. I mean, that’s not going in the barrel. We’re going to expose that. We’re going to take that out, and we’re going to—I say the word “expose.” I probably shouldn’t have used that word.

[laughter] Anyway, so we’re going to—

[01:49:49]

Eric Velasco: No pun intended.

[01:49:50]

Sam Nakos: Yes. So we’re going to take a—I called my friend at the printing place, and we printed up the banner in the front, and we put it on the menu, “*Playboy’s*, voted *Playboy’s*” and, man, people—it legitimized us in some way that people are like, “Number one.” I couldn’t believe it. I really couldn’t believe it. I still can’t believe it.

[01:50:09]

Eric Velasco: You must have gotten quite a ribbing from your customers.

[01:50:13]

Sam Nakos: You know, at first they made a few jokes, but I think it all straightened out, and it’s a serious deal to me. I mean, it just doesn’t—I had one person tell me they wanted me to cater for their church group, I would have to take it down off my website, and I thought about that probably for about fifteen minutes, and I thought, “Well, I would just put it right back up after I did the catering job,” so that’s dishonesty right there. So I’m not going to do that, because I’m not dishonest. [Laughs]

[01:50:44]

Eric Velasco: The reverse of putting some clothes on briefly.

[01:50:46]

Sam Nakos: That’s exactly right.

[01:50:48]

Eric Velasco: Like you said, it was a sense of validation for what you do.

[01:50:53]

Sam Nakos: Well, it has nothing to do with *Playboy*. It had nothing to do with women. They wrote a legitimate article, and the guy—I don’t even know his name, don’t even know his face—I was trying to find him to thank him, and he would not, as an honest journalist, let me find him, because he’s not there for that. He legitimately—nothing to take away from us. I don’t know him, never saw him. We don’t know who he is. And to this day, he doesn’t walk in and go, “Hey, I’m the one that wrote the article. Give me a free breakfast.” We don’t know who he is. But he put that in there from the bottom of his—as a journalist, from what he thinks. And, man.

[01:51:37]

Eric Velasco: Talked about your omelets, your pancakes, French toast.

[01:51:39]

Sam Nakos: I was absolutely floored and honored, and I think, you know, God moves in strange ways. We have the *Playboy* nomination for the best breakfast in the Southeast. I’ll take it.

[01:51:52]

Eric Velasco: What do you think your dad would have said?

[01:51:53]

Sam Nakos: Oh, my dad would be thrilled. I mean, I think, you know, he was just a—not because it’s *Playboy*, but, you know, we never—

[01:52:00]

Eric Velasco: Because it’s good publicity.

[01:52:01]

Sam Nakos: Yeah. We never won an award. My dad and I stood here all day long, father-and-son team in a small place, shook everybody’s hand, told them, “Thank you.” I mean, we made a lot of mistakes, you know. Heck, I was on a learning curve, and he was old-school. I mean, we were in the war together, you know. But we never won a single award, Eric. Nobody gave us nothing. We didn’t ever get Best Barbecue in Town, and it went from Golden Rule to Miss Myra’s, back to Golden Rule, back over here, back around, and it went all the way around to every single person, left us out for decades.

[01:52:39]

Eric Velasco: And you're talking local best-of contests?

[01:52:41]

Sam Nakos: Local best, and that could have been a vote, you know. You walk in and they give you a little postcard, already addressed, say, "Vote for us for barbecue," and it's already stamped. I mean, we never did that. We didn't. I'm sorry. We weren't those—we're just made of that kind of people. We'll take it, we'll earn it, and we'll take it, and we're just not going to manipulate it. We never won an award, and here comes the *Playboy* award.

[01:53:10]

Eric Velasco: Your customers. Are you bringing on new, younger customers?

[01:53:14]

Sam Nakos: Yes, we are. We see new people in here every day, every day. We look around, and I go, "Wow, it's busy out there."

They go, "Yeah, we're slammed."

I said, "New people?"

They go, "Yes, a lot of new faces." So people are coming in. People are trying us.

[01:53:30]

Eric Velasco: It's a great community here, great family community, to begin with.

[01:53:33]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, and Homewood, we were off the beaten path, and everything came and showed up around us. I mean, everything just—it's like we're the little place and then there's big buildings all around us. So, yeah, we became the epicenter. Everybody thinks Homewood's a place to open a restaurant. Let me warn people who are about to open a restaurant. I don't think so. There's too many restaurants. There's thirty-four choices within a quarter mile of here.

[01:54:00]

Eric Velasco: Seems like the numbers tripled or quadrupled just the last five, ten years.

[01:54:03]

Sam Nakos: It has, and, you know, we're still doing good. Our business is good and we're in the battle and we're doing good. But you want to come and open a restaurant in Homewood, get ready. There's a lot of people that want your dollar. [*Laughs*] And I'm not so sure. But I love being here. I mean, it's a great spot. I mean, we love Homewood.

[01:54:26]

Eric Velasco: No children?

[01:54:28]

Sam Nakos: No children for me.

[01:54:29]

Eric Velasco: Anybody in the wings?

[01:54:29]

Sam Nakos: Nobody—no children for me, that they can prove. [*Laughs*] No children for me and no wife. I’ve never been married. So I tell everybody I got married at an early age to the restaurant, and then my waitress jumps in and goes, “You have a lot of children. *We* are your children.” So that gets me off the hook a little bit.

[01:54:53]

Eric Velasco: Anybody in the wings, though? What’s going to happen when you decide to hang up your apron?

[01:54:57]

Sam Nakos: I think it stops. I hate to say it. I think it’s over. Unless somebody wants to come by, purchase it from me and let me show them, and it’d be like a slow attrition, me backing out, showing them all the recipes. But they can keep this going if they want to. I could be the landlord. I own the property. So they could pay me some monthly rent, commercial for that.

[01:55:25]

Eric Velasco: Take a page out of your Uncle Sam’s book.

[01:55:26]

Sam Nakos: Right. Exactly. You pay attention pretty good. But I don't—I feel like right now this is where I'm supposed to be, and a lot of people depend on me. I want to retire at a certain point, and then I'm going to make sure some of my loyal employees do good. I'm not going to forsake them. They've been loyal to me and they have stayed with me many, many years, and I'm going to, at some point, be here for them and still make money and still, hopefully, have an attachment to it.

[01:56:01]

Eric Velasco: Because it's an important part of your life as well.

[01:56:04]

Sam Nakos: I mean, I'm having a great time here with you.

[01:56:08]

Eric Velasco: When you're not here are you in your studio?

[01:56:09]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, here a studio, but I get bored. I go hit golf balls or then I go work out. You know, there's only so much things you can do. Go out to eat. What do you do? But I mean, this is a challenge. This keeps me sharp.

[01:56:21]

Eric Velasco: Where do you like to go eat?

[01:56:23]

Sam Nakos: Well, I always had a problem telling people this, but I think a great chain—there’s a great chain I go to. I was at Surin’s this week. I’ll say this. I ate at Surin’s and Carrabba’s, and I eat at Nabeel’s. I eat some Mexican food. I like Sitar, Indian food. Those are some of the places I hit, and I do say I do go to Carrabba’s probably a little bit too much, but I do like it.

[Laughs]

[01:57:09]

Eric Velasco: A couple things I want to follow through on that I’ve neglected to get back to. One, you were talking about white sauce, chicken and white sauce.

[01:57:17]

Sam Nakos: Yeah.

[01:57:18]

Eric Velasco: And that’s a big Alabama thing. I don’t think you see it too many other places but Alabama. You have chicken and white sauce on your men?

[01:57:27]

Sam Nakos: No, I don’t.

[01:57:29]

Eric Velasco: You don’t?

[01:57:29]

Sam Nakos: I do not.

[01:57:30]

Eric Velasco: I thought I heard some kind of derisive, dismissive reference to it.

[01:57:34]

Sam Nakos: That’s right, you did.

[01:57:35]

Eric Velasco: Talk to me.

[01:57:36]

Sam Nakos: I will talk to you, and you get the passion going here. So the white sauce is— what’s happening is, that is a northern Alabama thing. It’s Huntsville, Decatur, up there, and it’s kind of cool that that little area does have a different tradition. Birmingham, however, is not the white sauce tradition, as Texas is not the Birmingham tradition, as Italy is not or Greece is not the lasagna tradition, you know. But white sauce has happened in Birmingham because there are fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty barbecue places, and they have got to figure out a way to make themselves special and different. So they break the tradition of Birmingham which has been

established by Golden Rule, Ollie’s, Demetri’s, and the followers, predecessors, which is the red tomato-based barbecue sauce, and they grab onto this thing that kind of makes them different, and that’s the mayonnaise, vinegar sauce. I think it’s important for people in Birmingham to understand the tradition first, before they take a bite, because it’d be embarrassing for them to bring someone from New York and go, “Oh, here, come eat this white sauce,” and they’re geographically kind of out of a location. So they need to explain, “Our tradition is this. This is our tradition, and we do this. This is our traditions, you know, and that’s it.”

[01:59:17]

Eric Velasco: It’s probably even more popular in the age of Ranch dressing than otherwise.

[01:59:20]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, people love Ranch, yeah, that’s true. Ranch is good. Just throw some Ranch on there. No, I do have Ranch if they want it. *[Laughs]* No, but it does, because I’m older and I see it and I see the history of it, and people who are in their twenties, they need me to tell them. They need me to stand for the tradition. I have to take a stand for the tradition, and so does Van Sykes and so does Sammy at Golden Rule and Nicky Manikidas at the other Golden Rule. We have to stand for our tradition and preserve it.

[01:59:58]

Eric Velasco: And not only that, but, you know, this being such a food city, an increasingly food-savvy city, it’s also important to understand the regional differences and things like that, what authenticity is.

[02:00:11]

Sam Nakos: It is. It’s always important, yeah.

[02:00:16]

Eric Velasco: The other thing I want to get into is you talked about your Uncle Sam and helping finance, bankroll, help out people starting their own businesses. Tell me a little bit about that, because I think there were several “Uncle Sams” here in the Birmingham area.

[02:00:32]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, and, you know, Eric, I’m going to say this. All we heard our whole life was, you know, we heard people whisper it to us, because Uncle Sam wasn’t going public with this, but they would say, “You know, your Uncle Sam really helped me.” And I would just hear that. I wouldn’t hear, “Uncle Sam loaned me \$20,000 to start my business.” I wouldn’t hear any of that, because that wasn’t what he was doing it for. He was doing it for the right reasons, I think, then, and he had plenty of money. You know, we would just hear in passing how he helped people, but we wouldn’t hear the details.

[02:01:09]

Eric Velasco: Pretty much the say way, I guess, that he helped your dad get established.

[02:01:12]

Sam Nakos: Yeah, he helped my dad get established, but my dad—

[02:01:15]

Eric Velasco: But then he decides, “I’m going to go off and do my own thing.”

[02:01:17]

Sam Nakos: My dad came to the conclusion that he wanted to carve out his own niche, and he didn’t want—he didn’t mind help, but he wanted to be his own man, and that is the reason why he got in that partnership with that person that he really didn’t know very well, and he had to.

[02:01:40]

Eric Velasco: I’m sure Uncle Sam kind of stoked that desire, too, because I’m sure he was a great inspiration as well of wanting to be a self-made man like Sam.

[02:01:49]

Sam Nakos: Oh, yes. I totally agree. You’re exactly right. Exactly right.

[02:01:54]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing here? What did I fail to ask you?

[02:01:57]

Sam Nakos: I thought you did great. You covered—I mean, without you, I wouldn’t have gotten through it, so you did great. [*Laughs*]

[02:02:03]

Eric Velasco: Well, this has been a great discussion. I really appreciate your taking the time with us and helping us preserve these stories here.

[02:02:11]

Sam Nakos: I'm going to give you a compliment. You're probably going to edit this, but I think you are very observant, and you did your homework, and you're very interested in this whole thing. I think that is great. I think you did a great job.

[02:02:22]

Eric Velasco: Thank you. This is a fascinating topic, and I've really enjoyed getting in depth into it.

[02:02:26]

Sam Nakos: Please don't edit that out.

[02:02:28]

Eric Velasco: We're going to take that pause now for thirty seconds, get the ambient sound, while the redness disappears from my face.

[END OF INTERVIEW]