

KHALIL NUMAN
Grassmere Grill and Kabob – Nashville, Tennessee

Date: May 26, 2016

Location: Grassmere Grill and Kabob – Nashville, Tennessee

Interviewer: Jennifer Justus

Transcription: Deborah Mitchum

Length: 15:41

Project: Nashville's Nolensville Road

Interviewee: Khalil Numan
Interviewer: Jennifer Justus
Interview Date: May 26, 2016
Location: Nashville, TN
Length: Two audio files; 00:15:41

START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00:00]

Jennifer Justus: This is Jennifer Justus with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's May 26, 2016, and we're at Grassmere Grill and Kabob, and I'm with the owner, Khalil Numan, and I'm going to ask him to introduce himself now.

[00:00:16]

Khalil Numan: Khalil Numan.

[00:00:18]

JJ: Great. Okay, so let's start by can you just tell me about your restaurant: when did you open it and how did you get into the restaurant business?

[00:00:31]

KN: I open the restaurant 2006. And when I was kid, then, I loved cooking and I work few restaurants before, and then I decide to start a restaurant business.

[00:00:46]

JJ: Okay, but you opened this place in 2006?

[00:00:50]

KN: Yes.

[00:00:51]

JJ: Okay. And how did you learn to cook?

[00:00:55]

KN: From my mom, you know, and family. Yeah.

[00:01:03]

JJ: Is she here in Nashville?

[00:01:05]

KN: She passed away.

[00:01:07]

JJ: Did you do most of your learning—? You're Kurdish, so did you do most of your learning in your home country, or here, or a little of both?

[00:01:21]

KN: It's a little of both. It's mixed.

[00:01:24]

JJ: Okay, and was there one certain thing that you remember learning to make, from your mother, first?

[00:01:33]

KN: Just like soup and rice and chicken, yes.

[00:01:38]

JJ: Okay, so like the lentil soup, or—?

[00:01:41]

KN: It was both, both, [*Laughs*] you know lentil and bean and chicken soup, stuff like that.

[00:01:50]

JJ: Okay. Do you remember how old you were when you first started learning to cook?

[00:01:58]

KN: Probably around twelve, thirteen years old.

[00:02:02]

JJ: And did you take to it right away? Did you enjoy it, or was it more of a thing that your mother just needed and wanted you to do, or a combination of both?

[00:02:15]

KN: Oh, just enjoy it. I'm enjoy it.

[00:02:18]

JJ: And then can you tell me some of the things that you have here at the restaurant, some of the dishes that you serve?

[00:02:26]

KN: Oh, we do dishes like Middle Eastern and Greek, Persian, you know, and some Indian and American. It's mixed.

[00:02:40]

JJ: Okay, so like your buffet, for example, on weekdays—or do you do the buffet on the weekend too?

[00:02:49]

KN: No, we do it on Saturday. We're closed on Sunday.

[00:02:53]

JJ: Okay. What are some—? Can you kind of describe what the different things are on the buffet?

[00:03:02]

KN: We do have chicken, and kabob, and gyro meat, and bean soup, lentil soup, and two different rice, and we just bake chicken in the oven too.

[00:03:19]

JJ: Okay. Can you talk to me about—? I noticed the two different kinds of rices, so what are the differences in those?

[00:03:27]

KN: The difference is the basmati rice and the Chef Premium rice. It's two different flavor.

[00:03:37]

JJ: What are some of your most popular dishes, but then also what are your favorite dishes? I know those two things might be different.

[00:03:52]

KN: The gyro combo is most people like, and is my favorite dish is just chicken kabob.

[00:04:05]

JJ: Can you talk about your day, like what it's sort of like to run a restaurant like this?

[00:04:14]

KN: What do you mean by that?

[00:04:16]

JJ: Like, what time do you get started cooking and what time do you finish up?

[00:04:22]

KN: Oh, we just—. I have employee. They come here early in the morning, like 6:00 in the morning they start cooking, and I come in 11:00. We end at 8:00 p.m.

[00:04:37]

JJ: That is a long day. Can you tell me about the clientele? Do you get a lot of—?Well, who comes in here? What kind of people come in?

[00:04:54]

KN: It's almost all kind of people come here, all of them. They is maybe fifty-fifty, you know, fifty percent American and then the other percent is mixed Middle Eastern and Mexican.

[00:05:11]

JJ: Okay. Are we in "Little Kurdistan?" You hear about this "Little Kurdistan."

[00:05:18]

KN: Yeah, that's what they call Nashville, "Little Kurdistan," yes, and especially this area. Yep.

[00:05:25]

JJ: And why is that, because of places like this, and the market?

[00:05:30]

KN: Yes and there's a lot of Kurds living in Nashville. There's about probably around seventeen thousand Kurd.

[00:05:40]

JJ: Well, and that brings me to how you ended up in Nashville. So what is your coming-to-America story, if you don't mind me asking?

[00:05:49]

KN: In 1988 Saddam Hussein [*Unintelligible*] against Kurd and kill like hundred eighty-two thousand Kurd, and we come to Turkey for three and a half years and after that United State brought us over here. Well, I was in Texas first, two years, and after that I come to Nashville.

[00:06:19]

JJ: And how did you come to Nashville? Was it because you already knew people that were here, or by chance?

[00:06:27]

KN: Oh, when we come to United State, our village was like thirty families and then it's like ninety percent come here in Nashville, then a few family was in Dallas, and then we decide to all get together.

[00:06:45]

JJ: What were your first impressions of Nashville in particular?

[00:06:53]

KN: What do you mean by that?

[00:06:57]

JJ: Well, what did you think of Nashville?

[00:07:02]

KN: Nashville is good city and when we come over here it was small and we enjoy it then. After that it got big and busier. It's good city.

[00:07:17]

JJ: So how old were you when you arrived in Nashville?

[00:07:21]

KN: I was twenty-one years old.

[00:07:26]

JJ: And then did you start to work in restaurants at that point?

[00:07:31]

KN: No, I start warehouse first, first year, and then I start to work restaurant.

[00:07:44]

JJ: Different types of places or mostly Kurdish-owned?

[00:07:50]

KN: No, it's American-owned, yeah.

[00:07:53]

JJ: Okay. Let's see. What about food? So when you came to the United States what were your first impressions of food here compared to food in your home country?

[00:08:11]

KN: Actually when we come over here, we did still the same thing as back home and we just cook, you know, at home and we don't go out that much.

[00:08:24]

JJ: Is that the same now? Do you cook at home very often, or do you cook mostly here and then—?

[00:08:31]

KN: Actually I'm here every day but Sunday, yes, I cook at home.

[00:08:36]

JJ: So, do you do different things at home than you do here?

[00:08:41]

KN: Yes. *[Laughs]*

[00:08:44]

JJ: Is it more Kurdish or all over the map?

[00:08:49]

KN: It's a mix, you know, and then depends what kid like. You know, whatever they like, we just do that.

[00:08:56]

JJ: So, I believe your daughter was a server when I was here. Do you have a lot of family that works here?

[00:09:05]

KN: No, she's my niece and, yeah, it's all family business. All of them work here as a family.

[00:09:11]

JJ: And what is that like?

[00:09:14]

KN: It's good. [*Laughs*] It's good.

[00:09:19]

JJ: Is there a particular dish that you think, when you serve it here, it helps people understand your background more?

[00:09:32]

KN: Some of them do, yes.

[00:09:36]

JJ: Have you ever had conversations with people here in the restaurant about, you know, about the cuisine that you serve and about your background?

[00:09:48]

KN: Yes. Some people, they did ask, and then we did have conversation.

[00:09:53]

JJ: Okay. And I know Ramadan is coming up. Does that have an effect on business?

[00:10:00]

KN: Yes, especially the last time. Yes.

[00:10:04]

JJ: So it will be a little quieter in here?

[00:10:07]

KN: Yep.

[00:10:08]

JJ: Do you stay open?

[00:10:09]

KN: Yes. Yeah. We open every day and there's just regular business day.

[00:10:17]

JJ: Do you observe Ramadan?

[00:10:19]

KN: Yes.

[00:10:20]

JJ: And is it difficult to cook and to, you know, to have to hold off until later in the day?

[00:10:29]

KN: It is very hard. *[Laughs]* It is very hard.

[00:10:33]

JJ: Okay. Let's see what else here. I'm going to stop for just a second.

[00:10:41 *Break in recording*]

JJ: Is there a certain dish on your menu or on the buffet that you feel like helps express who you are, your background, the most?

[00:00:12]

KN: It's a kabob.

[00:00:14]

JJ: The kabob? And can you tell me how you prepare it?

[00:00:18]

KN: It's ground beef and lamb is mixed and then we just, you mix it with the spices and, you know, some onions, just like this.

[00:00:32]

JJ: Is that the one that you form into kind of a patty around the—?

[00:00:37]

KN: Yes, around the skewer, yeah.

[00:00:40]

JJ: Okay. Is there a dish, or maybe a food, that you're not able to find here that you miss from your home country?

[00:00:55]

KN: Now we do find everything here. Yes, we do.

[00:01:00]

JJ: And is that partly because of this being, you know, Little Kurdistan?

[00:01:05]

KN: Yes and there's a lot of Middle Eastern store around here. They just get from Middle East and all that.

[00:01:14]

JJ: If you were to take a group of people, or even one or two people, into a Middle Eastern grocery store, what are some things that you would want to point out to them that might be unique to them, or new to them?

[00:01:34]

KN: There's a lot of herbs there, you know, and then vegetable and stuff like that. They just do it on their backyard. You know, it's organic.

[00:01:50]

JJ: Do you grow food, any food of your own?

[00:01:55]

KN: I do it just for home, not for restaurant.

[00:01:59]

JJ: Okay. What types of things do you grow, and do you enjoy that?

[00:02:04]

KN: I do just like eggplant, and banana peppers I like, and tomatoes.

[00:02:12]

JJ: Okay. Are there other businesses, other Kurdish-owned businesses that you like to recommend to people or that you go to frequently along Nolensville Road?

[00:02:28]

KN: Yes. The Botan Market is down the road and it is at Edmondson (Pike). I go there every day myself to just buy vegetable and, you know, fruit from them.

[00:02:43]

JJ: And what's the name of it again?

[00:02:45]

KN: Botan Market.

[00:02:46]

JJ: Bhutan?

[00:02:47]

KN: Yes.

[00:02:48]

JJ: Oh, is it owned by Bhutanese people?

[00:02:50]

KN: No. Botan is one of Kurdish area, is on northern Kurdistan.

[00:03:00]

JJ: Okay, got it. So, in your native country, did you ever work in restaurants or cook professionally there?

[00:03:18]

KN: No.

[00:03:19]

JJ: Because you would have been younger also.

[00:03:22]

KN: Yes.

[00:03:23]

JJ: Okay. Is there anything else that you'd like for me to know about your business, or about the cuisine that you have here, that we haven't talked about?

[00:03:42]

KN: No, [*Unintelligible*].

[00:03:44]

JJ: Pardon?

[00:03:45]

KN: We did talk about everything.

[00:03:47]

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

[00:03:50]

KN: Thank you very much.

[00:04:00]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: June 14, 2016