



**Greg Pappas
Pappas' Grill
Birmingham, Alabama**

Date: February 11, 2017
Location: Pappas' Grill, Birmingham, AL
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Technitype Transcription
Length: Fifty-six minutes
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[*Note: Sound of loud coolers can be heard in the background.*]

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Greg Pappas. He has worked with some legendary Greek restaurant owners and has built his own legacy over twenty-five years at Pappas’ Grill. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Pappas, and, if you would, also spell your name and give us your date of birth.

[00:00:24]

Greg Pappas: I’m Greg Pappas, G-r-e-g P-a-p-p-a-s, 11/11/48.

[00:00:37]

Eric Velasco: Thank you very much. Now, I would like to start talking about the Greek Festival and your family’s involvement in it over the years. First of all, tell us what is a Greek Festival and how long has it been going on, and set a scene for us.

[00:00:52]

Greg Pappas: It seems like it’s been going on forever. I don’t really know the exact year that they started, but it was probably back in the sixties, late sixties. [Interviewer’s note: The first Birmingham Greek Festival was in 1972.]

I had a Sneaky Pete’s at Eastwood Mall. My mother was chairman of the Food Festival that year, and Pete Graphos and I had gone to Atlanta for a food show and saw the gyro sandwich that they were introducing over there, and we brought it back to Birmingham and started selling the gyro meat, the gyro sandwiches. [In his 2017 oral history interview with the

Southern Foodways Alliance, Pete Graphos places the Birmingham premiere of the gyro in 1976.]

[00:01:46]

Eric Velasco: First all, let’s back up for a second. What is Sneaky Pete’s and who is Pete Graphos?

[00:01:50]

Greg Pappas: Pete Graphos started Sneaky Pete’s [Hot Dogs] back in 1966, and I worked for him throughout college. I had just graduated from high school and worked for him on weekends, fell in love with that business and felt like that’s what I wanted to do. So after college and the army, I bought a franchise and had a franchise of Sneaky Pete’s at Eastwood Mall from 1974 to 1986.

[00:02:28]

Eric Velasco: Wasn’t Eastwood Birmingham’s first mall? [Interviewer’s note: It opened in 1960 and was the first indoor shopping center in the southeast and fifth in the nation.]

[00:02:30]

Greg Pappas: Right. That intersection at Eastwood Mall was Oporto and Crestwood Boulevard, and it was the busiest intersection in the state at the time.

[00:02:50]

Eric Velasco: Thanks for clearing that up for us. Now, we’re back to the festival. And your mom was chair?

[00:02:55]

Greg Pappas: Chairman of the festival that year. So I had the gyro sandwich at my hot dog stand at Eastwood, and I said, “Why don’t we do the gyro sandwich at the Food Festival, add that to it,” and she got excited about that. So I started that at the festival and I make all the Tzatziki sauce for the Food Festival. [Interviewer’s note: the Birmingham Greek Festival is commonly called the Greek food festival in Birmingham.]

[00:03:38]

Eric Velasco: When did you start cooking for the Food Festival?

[00:03:43]

Greg Pappas: That was probably 1976, ’77, somewhere right in there.

[00:03:51]

Eric Velasco: That first year, how much Tzatziki did you make?

[00:03:54]

Greg Pappas: I made probably eight to ten gallons of Tzatziki sauce. Now today I donate sixty gallons.

[00:04:09]

Eric Velasco: Sixty gallons. How long does it take you to make sixty gallons of sauce?

[00:04:14]

Greg Pappas: Half a day. [laughs]

[00:04:15]

Eric Velasco: That’s not bad. Now, the gyro, I’ve always considered it Greek. It sounded like it’s not a very Greek thing, just Greek-y kinds of ingredients, or is it?

[00:04:29]

Greg Pappas: To my understanding, it is a Greek thing and—I can’t think of his name right now, but he’s from Birmingham and started Kronos Foods in Chicago, which is an international company today, and they make the baklava, they make the pita bread, they make the gyro meat, and that’s where a lot of people get their product. [Interviewer’s note: Kronos Foods was founded in 1975 by Chris Tomaras. After arriving in Birmingham from Piraeus, Greece, in 1958, he worked at several restaurants including Greek-owned Michael’s Steakhouse and Tom’s Coney’s before moving to Chicago and starting Kronos. He made a fortune supplying Greek food including gyro ingredients. Tomaras, who eventually split time between residences in Chicago and Birmingham, opened Sweet Tea Restaurant in Birmingham in 2011, serving Southern-style food. He died in 2015 at age 78.]

[00:05:11]

Eric Velasco: So you’ve been making sauce for the festival ever since that first year?

[00:05:18]

Greg Pappas: Ever since that first year except for about a six-year gap there when I worked for Connie Kanakis.

[00:05:25]

Eric Velasco: Now, what is the Greek Festival? Where is it held?

[00:05:28]

Greg Pappas: It’s held at the church on Third Avenue and 19th Street South.

[00:05:34]

Eric Velasco: This is Holy Trinity - Holy Cross.

[00:05:37]

Greg Pappas: Right. Over the years, we have done different events and we started the Food Festival to make the community more familiar with Greek culture and things like that, and we used to have an event night in Athens that we held at the Civic Center, which was a fantastic event.

[00:06:18]

Eric Velasco: Were you ever involved in that?

[00:06:19]

Greg Pappas: One year I helped cook, but it was all the old Greeks that had restaurants in Birmingham, and we all went down there and cooked all day, and then it was a seated dinner with a Greek band, open bar and everything. They sold 1,000 tickets, and that was it, you know, and it was a great event.

[00:06:46]

Eric Velasco: And these started out as fundraisers for the church?

[00:06:48]

Greg Pappas: Right.

[00:06:50]

Eric Velasco: But since now it’s become a community fundraiser, I understand.

[00:06:54]

Greg Pappas: Well, yes, they donate to different charities and things like that.

[00:07:01]

Eric Velasco: And we’re talking this is a pretty big-deal event here in Birmingham, isn’t it?

[00:07:05]

Greg Pappas: Very big, very big.

[00:07:08]

Eric Velasco: About how many people would show up?

[00:07:10]

Greg Pappas: Gosh, I don’t know the numbers. I mean, it’s probably tens of thousands.

[00:07:20]

Eric Velasco: There’s food.

[00:07:23]

Greg Pappas: It had food, entertainment, novelty items, desserts, tours of the church.

[00:07:32]

Eric Velasco: Do you ever get up and dance with the others?

[00:07:36]

Greg Pappas: Oh, no. My knees are gone now. [laughs]

[00:07:38]

Eric Velasco: Were you ever a dancer?

[00:07:40]

Greg Pappas: No, not really. [laughs]

[00:07:49]

Eric Velasco: So let’s back up a little bit. Let’s talk a little bit—we’ve been talking about your mother. Please tell us your mother’s name.

[00:07:55]

Greg Pappas: Blanche Pappas.

[00:07:57]

Eric Velasco: B-l-a-n-c-h-e?

[00:07:59]

Greg Pappas: Right.

[00:08:00]

Eric Velasco: And where is she from?

[00:08:02]

Greg Pappas: She was born in West Virginia, grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Her father had a restaurant in Fort Wayne, and her family was from a little village outside of Kastoria, Greece, where my father’s family is from.

[00:08:34]

Eric Velasco: Is that an early bond between your mother and father?

[00:08:38]

Greg Pappas: I don’t know. I don’t know.

[00:08:40]

Eric Velasco: It’s got to be a small world when you run in–

[00:08:42]

Greg Pappas: I know.

[00:08:43]

Eric Velasco: How big is that village?

[00:08:44]

Greg Pappas: Well, it’s not very big. I would say maybe a couple of hundred people.

[00:08:51]

Eric Velasco: Where in Greece is it?

[00:08:52]

Greg Pappas: Northwest towards the Albanian border.

[00:08:56]

Eric Velasco: How do you spell it?

[00:08:57]

Greg Pappas: K-a-s-t-o-r-i-a.

[00:09:05]

Eric Velasco: And then what brought her to Birmingham?

[00:09:09]

Greg Pappas: When she got married to my father.

[00:09:13]

Eric Velasco: So what’s your father’s name?

[00:09:15]

Greg Pappas: Ernest Pappas.

[00:09:17]

Eric Velasco: E-r-n-e-s-t?

[00:09:19]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:09:20]

Eric Velasco: So was he born in the States or over there?

[00:09:24]

Greg Pappas: He was born in Kastoria.

[00:09:26]

Eric Velasco: What brought him to the U.S.?

[00:09:28]

Greg Pappas: His father brought him here back in the late twenties. We had cousins here.

[00:09:37]

Eric Velasco: In Birmingham?

[00:09:40]

Greg Pappas: In Birmingham. And my father was a great man. He passed away in 2004, but he came here not knowing English, went through Phillips High School here in Birmingham, and came over at the age of thirteen. Went through Phillips and then went to Auburn to major in agriculture. His father had an apple orchard in Kastoria. And my father played basketball for Auburn back in the thirties, and he was president of the student body at Auburn.

[00:10:37]

Eric Velasco: What position did he play?

[00:10:38]

Greg Pappas: Guard.

[00:10:40]

Eric Velasco: Your grandfather, what was his name?

[00:10:42]

Greg Pappas: Gregory Pappas.

[00:10:46]

Eric Velasco: I was going to ask you who you were named after, because that’s part of the tradition.

[00:10:49]

Greg Pappas: That’s the way it goes, yes.

[00:10:52]

Eric Velasco: Now, who were your—I guess, what, your dad’s cousins here or your granddad’s cousins here? Who were the kin over here?

[00:11:03]

Greg Pappas: My grandfather’s brother-in-law, which was Tom Stevens, they lived here and they had Home Baking Company, which was owned by two of their uncles, I believe.

[Interviewer’s note: Tom Stevens was a Greek immigrant who ran the company from its founding in 1920 until his death in 1983. His son, Ernest Stevens, ran the company until it was bought out in 1999. Another son who worked at Home Baking, Eli Stevens, now owns Lloyd’s Restaurant, which he bought in 1971 from one of his bread customers.]

[00:11:28]

Eric Velasco: Where was that located?

[00:11:30]

Greg Pappas: In Bessemer, Alabama. And to my understanding, the uncles retired, and my grandfather and his brother-in-law and two other cousins, I believe cousins, bought them out and moved it to Birmingham.

[00:12:03]

Eric Velasco: This would have been late teens, early twenties?

[00:12:07]

Greg Pappas: No, it would have been late twenties. Yeah, late twenties.

[00:12:16]

Eric Velasco: So this was after your father and grandfather had come here?

[00:12:19]

Greg Pappas: Right.

[00:12:25]

Eric Velasco: Now, did your father work there, too, or was he in school?

[00:12:27]

Greg Pappas: He ended up there. After World War II, he worked with the State of Alabama Conservation as a surveyor, and then my uncle—his uncle was having tough times at the time or whatever. I don’t know what was going on, but he wanted my father to come in with him, you know, and help him. So he did and he ended up staying throughout his life.

[00:13:08]

Eric Velasco: This was Mr. Stevens?

[00:13:09]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:13:10]

Eric Velasco: How did he spell his last name, with a V?

[00:13:13]

Greg Pappas: Yes, a *V*.

[00:13:15]

Eric Velasco: Now, was your father in the service in World War II?

[00:13:20]

Greg Pappas: Right. He was in the army stationed in the Philippines.

[00:13:23]

Eric Velasco: U.S. Army.

[00:13:24]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:13:25]

Eric Velasco: Stationed in the Philippines.

[00:13:26]

Greg Pappas: Mm-hmm.

[00:13:27]

Eric Velasco: How long was he in the army?

[00:13:31]

Greg Pappas: Oh, gosh. I want to say three, four years. He was wounded in the Philippines; Purple Heart.

[00:13:43]

Eric Velasco: Did he ever talk about his service or what it meant to him?

[00:13:46]

Greg Pappas: He didn't. He didn't. He didn't. Very patriotic, but didn't like to talk about the war.

[00:13:53]

Eric Velasco: Right. I had uncles who were in World War II, and they never talked about it afterward either. But that was part of what I was trying to get at, was that it must have been special to him serving his new country. At this point, he and his family are very well established in it.

[00:14:12]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:14:15]

Eric Velasco: How did your father express his patriotism otherwise?

[00:14:21]

Greg Pappas: Well, he always was very emphatic on voting and keeping up with current events, you know, things like that, know what’s going on in the world.

[00:14:38]

Eric Velasco: So he stayed at the bakery for how long?

[00:14:45]

Greg Pappas: Till he retired at sixty-five, but he stayed down there till they sold out, which I don’t remember the year they sold out, but he was like eighty years old.

[00:15:00]

Eric Velasco: How old was your father when he died?

[00:15:01]

Greg Pappas: Eighty-nine.

[00:15:02]

Eric Velasco: What kind of products did they make there?

[00:15:06]

Greg Pappas: Hamburger buns, hot dog buns, sandwich bread, rolls.

[00:15:12]

Eric Velasco: Would those wind up at some of the hog dog places and other places?

[00:15:15]

Greg Pappas: Oh, yeah. They had all the—well, most of the restaurants in Birmingham were owned by Greeks, and they had all the restaurant business in Birmingham, practically.

[00:15:29]

Eric Velasco: Nice position to be in.

[00:15:31]

Greg Pappas: Uh-huh.

[00:15:33]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell me about your siblings. What are their names?

[00:15:37]

Greg Pappas: I have two sisters, Carol and Vicky.

[00:15:40]

Eric Velasco: You had mentioned Carol before the interview. What does she do?

[00:15:43]

Greg Pappas: She has her own company called Discover, and she puts out a magazine for St. Clair County. And my sister is in government sales with AT&T.

[00:16:02]

Eric Velasco: St. Clair County, that’s an adjoining county to this county, Jefferson.

[00:16:05]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:16:11]

Eric Velasco: So how did your parents meet and wind up back here? He’s here. She’s there.

[00:16:17]

Greg Pappas: I don’t know if they met at a convention or somebody else’s wedding up in Chicago.

[00:16:28]

Eric Velasco: And tell people what these conventions are.

[00:16:31]

Greg Pappas: Well, you have the Hellenic, the Greek conventions all over the country, and I think they were a lot bigger back in the day than it is today, but—

[00:16:56]

Eric Velasco: So it was a way to have people interact, preserve the culture.

[00:16:59]

Greg Pappas: Right.

[00:17:02]

Eric Velasco: And a great way to meet girls, apparently.

[00:17:04]

Greg Pappas: That’s right. [laughter]

[00:17:09]

Eric Velasco: So when did they get married? I’m putting you on the spot.

[00:17:17]

Greg Pappas: It was after the war, so it would have been ’47, ’46 or ’47.

[00:17:25]

Eric Velasco: And he brought his bride back here?

[00:17:27]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:17:29]

Eric Velasco: What’s the birth order of the children? Are you the oldest?

[00:17:34]

Greg Pappas: I’m the oldest and my mother’s favorite child. [laughs]

[00:17:40]

Eric Velasco: First and favorite son, eh? Where did you grow up?

[00:17:46]

Greg Pappas: In Crestwood here in Birmingham.

[00:17:51]

Eric Velasco: Were there many other Greeks in the neighborhood?

[00:17:53]

Greg Pappas: Not very many. Most of the Greeks were in Norwood or Southside and Ensley.

[00:18:00]

Eric Velasco: Norwood is not far from where you grew up.

[00:18:04]

Greg Pappas: From downtown Birmingham.

[00:18:05]

Eric Velasco: And then Ensley’s over on the west side.

[00:18:07]

Greg Pappas: On the west side. I grew up on the east side.

[00:18:10]

Eric Velasco: A lot of mills out there in the Ensley area. I guess that was an attraction for a while.

[00:18:15]

Greg Pappas: Well, they had them downtown Birmingham also. [Interviewer’s note: One of the now-shuttered steel mills, Sloss Furnace, is close to where Mr. Pappas grew up.]

[00:18:19]

Eric Velasco: So tell me a little bit about Birmingham when you were growing up. This would have been—what year were you born?

[00:18:26]

Greg Pappas: Forty-eight.

[00:18:28]

Eric Velasco: So this would have been in the fifties, early sixties. Tell us about Birmingham then.

[00:18:35]

Greg Pappas: It was a great city, great city, and, you know, to see it empty now compared to when I was growing up, it’s sad.

[00:18:50]

Eric Velasco: The downtown area.

[00:18:52]

Greg Pappas: The downtown area, downtown area. And it’s just, you know, Christmas, people all over the place. Plus, the bakery was downtown.

[00:19:10]

Eric Velasco: Where downtown was it?

[00:19:11]

Greg Pappas: Fourth Avenue and 26th Street North.

[00:19:19]

Eric Velasco: So you said most of the restaurants at the time were Greek-owned.

[00:19:26]

Greg Pappas: Mm-hmm.

[00:19:27]

Eric Velasco: Did you guys go out to eat much?

[00:19:30]

Greg Pappas: We went out to eat. We went to Homewood a lot. You had the Gold Nugget in Homewood, and I believe Armand’s or Armando’s, I can’t remember, but I believe they were Greek-owned. And then Gulas’. Gus Gulas had Gulas’ Restaurant in Five Points West and Eastwood, and, of course, Eastwood was where we lived, and we went over there quite a bit. A lot of Greek functions were at Gus’ restaurant for like baptisms, stuff like that.

[00:20:35]

Eric Velasco: What was Gulas’ Restaurant like?

[00:20:37]

Greg Pappas: It was fine dining. Food was always good, but I—

[00:20:50]

Eric Velasco: What kind of food? Are we talking steaks, seafood?

[00:20:52]

Greg Pappas: Well, yeah, steaks and seafood.

[00:20:54]

Eric Velasco: Because really that was one of the things that I’ve always found very fascinating about the Greek restaurateurs here is that very few of them—you’re one of the few who does “This is my Greek menu here.”

[00:21:05]

Greg Pappas: Right.

[00:21:07]

Eric Velasco: Seems like barbeque—

[00:21:08]

Greg Pappas: I’ve taken a stand. [laughs] I try to keep everything Greek or with a Greek flair. To my knowledge, I think I’m the only one in Birmingham that serves Greek food on a daily basis, a variety of Greek food on a daily basis.

[00:21:31]

Eric Velasco: So what is it about the Greeks and hot dogs and barbecue and meats-and-three?

[00:21:38]

Greg Pappas: I don’t know. There was hot dog stands on every corner in Birmingham. It was the hot dog capital of the South back in the day.

[00:21:49]

Eric Velasco: When did you start with Sneaky Pete’s? How old were you?

[00:21:54]

Greg Pappas: Well, I started helping Pete in 1966, so I was eighteen, seventeen.

[00:22:13]

Eric Velasco: Was Eastwood open? No. Sixty-six, that’s when he started.

[00:22:15]

Greg Pappas: Right. That’s when he started.

[00:22:17]

Eric Velasco: Where was the original location?

[00:22:19]

Greg Pappas: Eighth Avenue and 20th Street South.

[00:22:23]

Eric Velasco: And then what did you do there?

[00:22:27]

Greg Pappas: Just made hot dogs.

[00:22:31]

Eric Velasco: Describe the Sneaky Pete’s, the environment. Was it one of those typical small places?

[00:22:37]

Greg Pappas: They were right there. It was small, like all of them. The majority of the clientele were UAB students, medical students, and stuff like that. You know, we were about a block away. [Interviewer’s note: UAB is the University of Alabama at Birmingham.]

[00:22:53]

Eric Velasco: And by small, we’re talking three people could not stand shoulder-to-shoulder between the grill and the bar.

[00:23:05]

Greg Pappas: Right, right. [laughs]

[00:23:14]

Eric Velasco: Did you work there through school?

[00:23:16]

Greg Pappas: Throughout college, four years, and then, like I say, I went in the army after that. And when I got back, I went to work for Pete to look for a franchise. We found one at Eastwood Mall, and I bought that franchise and we opened up there.

[00:23:47]

Eric Velasco: How long were you in the military?

[00:23:51]

Greg Pappas: Two years.

[00:23:52]

Eric Velasco: Army?

[00:23:54]

Greg Pappas: In the army.

[00:23:55]

Eric Velasco: Where did you serve?

[00:23:56]

Greg Pappas: I was stationed in Frankfurt, Germany.

[00:23:59]

Eric Velasco: What did you do?

[00:24:01]

Greg Pappas: I was a typist.

[00:24:03]

Eric Velasco: That’s pretty good.

[00:24:05]

Greg Pappas: Luckily, I took a class in college and got out of Vietnam. [laughs]

[00:24:10]

Eric Velasco: They didn’t get you cooking or anything?

[00:24:13]

Greg Pappas: No. They asked me. I told them I didn’t know how. I didn’t want any part of that mess hall. [laughs]

[00:24:19]

Eric Velasco: How did you learn to cook, though?

[00:24:21]

Greg Pappas: Just watching my mother and just watching other people.

[00:24:33]

Eric Velasco: What kind of food did she cook at home?

[00:24:36]

Greg Pappas: Other than fried chicken and mashed potatoes, everything was Greek. [laughs]

[00:24:47]

Eric Velasco: Now, the fried chicken and mashed potatoes, was that a big night in the family, a special night?

[00:24:52]

Greg Pappas: No. Sunday was where we’d have lamb or things like that.

[00:24:59]

Eric Velasco: What was your favorite thing to eat growing up?

[00:25:03]

Greg Pappas: I think the lamb and grape leaves.

[00:25:09]

Eric Velasco: Now, obviously you folks were pretty heavily involved in the church.

[00:25:13]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:25:15]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about that. Would you go every Sunday? Were there other events going on in church? Tell me the role the church played in the community.

[00:25:24]

Greg Pappas: Well, we had what we called GOYA, Greek Orthodox Youth of America, and, as a child, everybody was involved in that. We'd have dances throughout the year for fundraisers, and it just kept us all together.

[00:25:46]

Eric Velasco: Did your parents speak Greek in the home?

[00:25:52]

Greg Pappas: Not that much. They did, but not to us. Now, all the kids, we all went to Greek School, just like the *Big Fat Greek Wedding* movie, after grammar school, to learn Greek, to read and write. Of course, I wanted to play sports and be with my friends, so I didn’t pick it up that well. [laughs] My wife’s fluent, but I’m not.

[00:26:29]

Eric Velasco: Just about everybody who grew up here talks about having gone to Greek School. Did anybody get out of it?

[00:26:35]

Greg Pappas: No, no. [laughs] No way.

[00:26:40]

Eric Velasco: So your parents would speak Greek when they didn’t want you guys to know what they were saying?

[00:26:46]

Greg Pappas: I think so. And even my grandmother, she lived with us, my mother’s mother, and she would talk broken English to us. She didn’t even talk Greek to us. It was always trying to Americanize, I guess. I don’t know.

[00:27:08]

Eric Velasco: That's exactly what I was going to ask. Was it just something where you wanted to be part of the community and fit in, but still maintain this strong cultural bond?

[00:27:17]

Greg Pappas: Mm-hmm.

[00:27:19]

Eric Velasco: Now, your mother sounded like a remarkable person. Tell me about some of the things she did in her life.

[00:27:27]

Greg Pappas: She was a legal secretary for years, president of, I believe, the National Legal Secretaries, and she would go to conventions all over the country. She was the first woman that was ever elected to the board at the Greek Church.

[00:28:01]

Eric Velasco: An all-male [unclear].

[00:28:05]

Greg Pappas: And all males.

[00:28:08]

Eric Velasco: This congregation goes back to, what, 1906 or something?

[00:28:13]

Greg Pappas: I believe so. [Interviewer’s note: Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church was established in 1906 and held its first service in 1907 in Birmingham’s Southside area. Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church opened in 1933 in north Birmingham. The congregations merged in 1953 as Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral at 307 19th Street South.]

[00:28:16]

Eric Velasco: And when was your mother elected?

[00:28:19]

Greg Pappas: Gosh. When I was very young. It was probably in the early sixties, maybe.

[00:28:33]

Eric Velasco: So that’s practically unheard of.

[00:28:35]

Greg Pappas: Or late fifties, maybe. I don’t recall. But if anybody could start a Women’s Lib Movement, it’d be my mother.

[00:28:44]

Eric Velasco: She sounded like quite a leader.

[00:28:45]

Greg Pappas: Yes, she was.

[00:28:48]

Eric Velasco: And then also she was very involved in the school system, Birmingham school system?

[00:28:52]

Greg Pappas: She was always involved in PTA. She was a den mother with the Cub Scouts.

[00:29:04]

Eric Velasco: I read something about her starting a cultural arts program with the city schools.

[00:29:10]

Greg Pappas: I don’t know.

[00:29:18]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like just an incredible woman.

[00:29:21]

Greg Pappas: She was.

[00:29:23]

Eric Velasco: Tell us a little bit about Pete Graphos.

[00:29:27]

Greg Pappas: Pete is a very good friend of mine. We’ve known each other all our lives. He, like I say, started the Sneaky Pete’s in ’66 and ended up having like twenty, twenty-five franchises around Birmingham, did real well. [Interviewer’s note: Sneaky Pete’s had 24 stores before Mr. Graphos sold the franchise in 1986.]

[00:30:03]

Eric Velasco: What kind of personality did he have?

[00:30:05]

Greg Pappas: A very good personality, very good personality, easy to get along with. He’s my son’s godfather.

[00:30:16]

Eric Velasco: Now, were you the first non-brother to have a Sneaky Pete’s? [Interviewer’s note: Pete’s brother, Sam, opened the third Sneaky Pete’s before leaving the franchise in the late 1970s and rebranding it as Sam’s Super Samwiches. Sam’s twin, Jimmy Graphos, opened the

fourth Sneaky Pete’s. Jimmy kept that location when he left the franchise, and renamed it Jimmy’s Hot Dogs & Burgers. Sam’s is still open. Jimmy died in 2016.]

[00:30:20]

Greg Pappas: No. No, you had Andrew Collins’ brother-in-law, Tony Ippolito. I think he had a Sneaky Pete’s on, I don’t know, 22nd Street North, downtown Birmingham. I don’t remember. I was probably about third or fourth down the line. [Interviewer’s note: John Collins, a Greek immigrant who founded Lyric Hot Dogs in 1957, bought the downtown Sneaky Pete’s location but had Ippolito run it. Andrew Collins, who took over the Lyric in 1971, is John’s son. One of Andrew’s sisters, Katherine, married Ippolito. Ippolito, who is of Italian heritage, also owned Tony’s Terrific Hot Dogs in Birmingham, which was open from 1980-2009.]

[00:31:10]

Eric Velasco: Now, when you started doing the gyros, that’s a pretty big departure from what the menu was. Tell me about the menu, what Sneaky Pete’s served.

[00:31:20]

Greg Pappas: Well, it was hot dogs and hamburgers, but you had a hot dog, a chili dog, and a hot dog with a beef sauce, which we call the Special, and those were the three items.

[00:31:35]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the beef sauce, because that seems to be the common link here.

[00:31:39]

Greg Pappas: It’s just a ground beef sauce, and then we’d pour the hot dog sauce over it, which was my favorite.

[00:31:55]

Eric Velasco: Did the gyros go over well?

[00:31:58]

Greg Pappas: They did. They did.

[00:32:02]

Eric Velasco: Did the other restaurants have it?

[00:32:03]

Greg Pappas: No. Pete had it at his original store on Eighth Avenue [South], and I had it at mine, but we were the only two that sold the gyros. Now, I think we were the first ones in Birmingham to sell gyros.

[00:32:21]

Eric Velasco: What makes your Tzatziki sauce so good?

[00:32:28]

Greg Pappas: It’s my wife’s recipe, who lives in Athens, Greece. I don’t know if other people make their own or not. I don’t know if they buy it store-bought or not. But I make everything here, so maybe that’s it. I don’t know. But I think I get customers day in and day out that I have the best Tzatziki sauce.

[00:33:14]

Eric Velasco: Your wife, Pat, tell us a little bit about her. What was her maiden name and where is she from?

[00:33:19]

Greg Pappas: Pat was born here in Birmingham. She was a Malfas. Her dad had, back in the—we were trying to think the other day—late twenties to probably early sixties, he had Bluebird Cafe on First Avenue North and somewhere around 43rd Street till he retired.

[00:33:56]

Eric Velasco: What kind of food did they serve?

[00:33:56]

Greg Pappas: I don’t even know.

[00:34:00]

Eric Velasco: What was his name, and would you spell that last name?

[00:34:02]

Greg Pappas: Pete Malfas, M-a-l-f-a-s.

[00:34:08]

Eric Velasco: So she kind of grew up in the restaurant world.

[00:34:11]

Greg Pappas: Well, yes and no. I mean, you know, it’s funny, he was sixty years old when my wife was born.

[00:34:22]

Eric Velasco: Surprise.

[00:34:23]

Greg Pappas: So he was close to retirement when she was very small. [laughs]

[00:34:32]

Eric Velasco: He sounded like an interesting fellow too.

[00:34:34]

Greg Pappas: Uh-huh. [laughs]

[00:34:37]

Eric Velasco: How did you two meet?

[00:34:38]

Greg Pappas: We went to Greek School together, growing up, and she went to Ramsay High School. I went to Phillips. Other than church, we hardly ever saw each other, but then after I got out of the army, we met again at a party and started dating after that, and then ended up getting married.

[00:35:13]

Eric Velasco: How long did you date before you got married?

[00:35:16]

Greg Pappas: Well, we probably dated six months, got engaged. Her father took her to Greece for almost a year. [laughs] Then we got married when she came back. So I don’t know the story behind that.

[00:35:40]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like your father-in-law was not too crazy about this potential union.

[00:35:46]

Greg Pappas: No, no. He liked me.

[00:35:50]

Eric Velasco: Good.

[00:35:52]

Greg Pappas: I think he wanted her to have one last trip with them, and they went to Greece quite frequently. And my wife, I believe her sophomore year in high school, they went to Greece for a year, and she went to business school over there, all-girls school over there in Athens.

[00:36:17]

Eric Velasco: Now, was he from Greece?

[00:36:18]

Greg Pappas: Yes, from the island of Lefkada.

[00:36:24]

Eric Velasco: Do you have any other relatives here aside from the ones associated with the bakery?

[00:36:30]

Greg Pappas: No, no.

[00:36:39]

Eric Velasco: When did you two get married?

[00:36:41]

Greg Pappas: We got married in 1975.

[00:36:44]

Eric Velasco: Children?

[00:36:46]

Greg Pappas: One boy.

[00:36:48]

Eric Velasco: What’s his name?

[00:36:49]

Greg Pappas: Ernest. [laughs]

[00:36:50]

Eric Velasco: Ernest. Of course. And how old is he?

[00:36:54]

Greg Pappas: He’s thirty-nine.

[00:36:56]

Eric Velasco: What does he do?

[00:36:57]

Greg Pappas: He helps us out here.

[00:36:59]

Eric Velasco: I was going to ask if there was any kind of connection to the restaurant. So, growing up, did he spend a lot of time in here?

[00:37:06]

Greg Pappas: Well, no. My son is hearing impaired. He’s totally deaf. And depending on what kind of mood he’s in—of course, he’s helping us out quite a bit now.

[00:37:25]

Eric Velasco: Now, where else did you work before you opened up Pappas’? You mentioned Rossi’s.

[00:37:31]

Greg Pappas: Right. Jim Wilson out of Montgomery, real estate developer, bought Eastwood Mall, and he was going to redo Eastwood Mall and wouldn’t renew anybody’s lease on the exterior part of the mall. So Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, me, NBC Bank, Dilly’s Deli that were all surrounding Eastwood Mall had to leave.

[00:38:11]

Eric Velasco: When was this?

[00:38:14]

Greg Pappas: That was in 1986. So I tried to relocate in the area and could not. I frequented— throughout the years, my wife and I ate at Rossi’s restaurant quite a bit and had known Connie Kanakis, which is a very good restaurateur in Birmingham.

[00:38:45]

Eric Velasco: Greek.

[00:38:47]

Greg Pappas: Greek. And he asked me if I’d be interested in—they were going to open up another location on Highway 280 here in Birmingham and wanted to know if I would manage the downtown store.

[00:39:06]

Eric Velasco: Where was Rossi’s?

[00:39:10]

Greg Pappas: On 20th Street between Third and Fourth Avenue South. And it was an Italian restaurant. So I told him I’d try it and if I didn’t like it, I would quit.

[00:39:27]

Eric Velasco: Was this a conversation one night when you two were in for dinner or—

[00:39:30]

Greg Pappas: I don’t think we were at the restaurant, but we ran into each other and he asked me if I was interested. So I did, and I really enjoyed it, and it is totally different from the fast food business, and I really liked it and stayed with them for six years before I bought this location in 1992.

[00:40:10]

Eric Velasco: Now, this was a second Rossi’s location?

[00:40:13]

Greg Pappas: Right. I was at the original for a year and then—

[00:40:18]

Eric Velasco: Where was the second one?

[00:40:19]

Greg Pappas: On Highway 280 in Birmingham, in Mountain Brook. [Interviewer’s note: Mountain Brook is a municipal suburb south of Birmingham.]

[00:40:27]

Eric Velasco: Now, what made you decide to open your own place?

[00:40:37]

Greg Pappas: I wanted to get back in business for myself. Been in business for myself my whole life except for those six years, and even though I enjoyed what I was doing, I wanted to do this.

[00:41:00]

Eric Velasco: What would you do at the Rossi's downtown? Were you working front of the house doing hosting and those kinds of things? [Interviewer's note: The original Rossi's actually was in Birmingham's Southside area, near Five Points South.]

[00:41:09]

Greg Pappas: The front of the house and overseeing the kitchen.

[00:41:13]

Eric Velasco: Now, Rossi's was quite the place in the day. When was it open? What years, the general time period was it open?

[00:41:22]

Greg Pappas: Gosh. Well, I know they were there in the fifties.

[00:41:31]

Eric Velasco: And he had there and Michael's Sirloin Room.

[00:41:33]

Greg Pappas: Had Michael’s Sirloin below him. Rossi’s was upstairs.

[00:41:36]

Eric Velasco: And Emil’s Cantina.

[00:41:37]

Greg Pappas: Right. Then you had Down the Street, around the corner, which was Ghika Morgan, who was Greek. [Interviewer’s note: Down the Street was known for its Caesar salad, which was prepared tableside.]

Michael’s was Greek. You had George Salem across the street with the Coalyard.

[Interviewer’s note: Ed Salem, a former University of Alabama and pro football player, and his bother-in-law, Louis Zaden Sr., were partners in drive-in restaurants starting in the 1950s. Zaden opened the Coalyard Restaurant and Lounge on 20th Street South at Third Avenue in 1970.]

[00:41:59]

Eric Velasco: What was the Coalyard?

[00:42:00]

Greg Pappas: It was a restaurant.

[00:42:02]

Eric Velasco: And basically, anybody who was anybody who would come through Birmingham would go to Rossi’s.

[00:42:09]

Greg Pappas: They were on 20th Street.

[00:42:11]

Eric Velasco: What kind of people—we hear a lot about Bear Bryant going there.

[00:42:15]

Greg Pappas: Well, sporting events. You know, anything that was going on in Birmingham, people ended up on 20th Street.

[00:42:28]

Eric Velasco: And it was near—what was the hotel down there?

[00:42:30]

Greg Pappas: Parliament Inn was the original hotel. I can’t remember the one on up. But Parliament Inn—Parliament House, that’s what it was. Parliament House was a real nice hotel at the time. [Interviewer’s note: Parliament House was Birmingham’s premiere hotel when it opened in 1964, hosting sports figures and dignitaries visiting town. It closed in 2006 and was razed in 2008.]

[00:42:53]

Eric Velasco: Was that Greek-owned?

[00:42:54]

Greg Pappas: No.

[00:42:58]

Eric Velasco: Now, you mentioned that it was important to you to have Greek food on your menu.

[00:43:06]

Greg Pappas: It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, and my father never felt like you would get enough support on selling exclusive Greek cuisine, but as the years went on, you know, the Mediterranean diet is one of the best, and it’s kind of snowballed from there.

[00:43:39]

Eric Velasco: Greek Festival’s got to be your best advertisement too.

[00:43:42]

Greg Pappas: Well, I know. I know. And that’s in one of my ads.

[00:43:46]

Eric Velasco: Describe your menu to us, please.

[00:43:49]

Greg Pappas: I sell a Pastitsio, Moussaka, grape leaves, Greek-style snapper that I sell at night, Souvlaki, chicken, beef, and pork Souvlaki, and then, of course, the gyro sandwich, the chicken gyro, and then a few years back I started doing a Philly steak sandwich and a Reuben sandwich all in pita bread, and that’s gone over real well.

[00:44:33]

Eric Velasco: Where do you get your pita?

[00:44:35]

Greg Pappas: From Chicago. [laughs]

[00:44:37]

Eric Velasco: Greek bakery?

[00:44:40]

Greg Pappas: Uh-huh.

[00:44:44]

Eric Velasco: What are some of the customer favorites here?

[00:44:49]

Greg Pappas: The chargrilled chicken on top of the Greek Salad is a big seller. I started doing gyro strips on top of Greek Salad a few years back, and that’s gone over real well. And then everybody eats chicken. You know, chicken is probably the best seller, but we sell a lot of everything else. I mean, it’s so time-consuming, it’s hard to keep up at times. We have Spanakopita, the spinach pie, and—

[00:45:32]

Eric Velasco: These are some fairly complex things to make.

[00:45:35]

Greg Pappas: It is. It is. People ask us, you know, “Do you make your baklavas?” Said, “No, I buy it out of Chicago.” I said, “We don’t have time.” [laughs]

[00:45:49]

Eric Velasco: How did you develop your recipes?

[00:45:55]

Greg Pappas: Probably taste. I cook everything to my taste buds and hopefully everybody likes it.

[00:46:04]

Eric Velasco: Well, twenty-five years now?

[00:46:06]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:46:07]

Eric Velasco: Apparently people are liking it okay.

[00:46:09]

Greg Pappas: Mm-hmm. Some recipes are my mother’s, some are my wife’s mother’s, and some are mine.

[00:46:20]

Eric Velasco: Have you been in this location all along?

[00:46:25]

Greg Pappas: Yes, 1992 till today.

[telephone interruption]

[00:47:08]

Eric Velasco: Before the phone call, you were saying you’ve been here since you opened in 1992.

[00:47:14]

Greg Pappas: October '92 till today.

[00:47:16]

Eric Velasco: It must have been great having City Hall move in your plaza. [Interviewer's note: The Vestavia Hills City Hall complex relocated there in 2015.]

[00:47:20]

Greg Pappas: It was nice.

[00:47:26]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about your customers.

[00:47:31]

Greg Pappas: I have a lot of professional people that eat in here. Families, I've seen over the last twenty-five years, seen kids grow up, and now they're married and they're my customers now, you know. So it's just a cycle.

[00:47:54]

Eric Velasco: Do you get many Greeks in here?

[00:47:56]

Greg Pappas: I get a few. I get quite a few, but it's not frequently.

[00:48:14]

Eric Velasco: I meant to ask you about Connie Kanakis. Tell us a little bit about him. What’s his personality like?

[00:48:22]

Greg Pappas: Connie is very outgoing, a very smart man, and I really think a lot of him, and now that he’s retired, he’s one of my regular customers.

[00:48:48]

Eric Velasco: How often does he come in?

[00:48:49]

Greg Pappas: Oh, probably once every other week.

[00:48:53]

Eric Velasco: Now, he, after Rossi’s, he had his own place, too, Connie Kanakis’.

[00:48:53]

Greg Pappas: He had Connie Kanakis’, and then he went to, I believe, Wilmington, North Carolina, and stayed up there for about two years and then came on back. [Interviewer’s note: Connie Kanakis’ Café opened in the 1980s. According to media reports, Kanakis and partners opened a Rossi’s in Myrtle Beach, S.C., in 1988, which closed in 2002. Kanakis returned to Birmingham two years after that.]

[00:49:15]

Eric Velasco: And then was involved in Do Di Yo’s?

[00:49:18]

Greg Pappas: And was involved in Do Di Yo’s, which was part Greek-owned. And after that, he retired. [Interviewer’s note: Mr. Kanakis, George C. Sarris (Fish Market Southside) and others opened Do Di Yo’s restaurant in 2009. It closed in 2015.]

[00:49:32]

Eric Velasco: So tell us about your day here. You’re open, what, from about ten in the morning, I believe it is.

[00:49:38]

Greg Pappas: Ten in the morning till eight at night, Monday through Friday, close at three on Saturdays. Depending on catering—we do a lot of catering with the drug reps to different hospitals, so depending on what the catering is, we’re here anywhere from six in the morning till eight. So it’s at least a thirteen-hour day for me.

[00:50:06]

Eric Velasco: And Mrs. Pappas, is she working here as well?

[00:50:10]

Greg Pappas: She works lunch, and she was in retail all her life selling clothes, and she was a buyer for Rosemary’s Dress Shop in Crestline Village. Then after that, she was working at Gus Meyer at Brookwood Mall when I bought this. So I worked it by myself until I could build the business, and then I made her quit and come help me. She’s been here ever since.

[00:50:49]

Eric Velasco: This is a two-person operation?

[00:50:51]

Greg Pappas: Two and my son’s here.

[00:50:54]

Eric Velasco: Two plus one. [laughs]

[00:50:55]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:50:56]

Eric Velasco: Now, you have these beautiful photos all over the wall here. Tell us about them. Where are they from?

[00:51:03]

Greg Pappas: Most of them are on the island of Lefkada, where my wife’s family’s from, and it is beautiful, right across—it’s the only island in Greece that you can drive to.

[00:51:26]

Eric Velasco: So there’s a bridge?

[00:51:29]

Greg Pappas: There’s a bridge that will take you to that island.

[00:51:33]

Eric Velasco: This place is a postcard view.

[00:51:34]

Greg Pappas: I know. And Onassis’ island, the island of Skorpis, is right there next to this island.

[00:51:46]

Eric Velasco: No bridge to that one, I’m sure.

[00:51:47]

Greg Pappas: No bridge to that one. It’s just a great place. I mean, I could move there tomorrow.

[00:51:59]

Eric Velasco: Do you go to Greece often?

[00:52:01]

Greg Pappas: It’s been a while since we’ve been. I’ve been six times. My wife has been numerous times.

[00:52:08]

Eric Velasco: She’s still got a lot of family back there?

[00:52:10]

Greg Pappas: Well, both of us do.

[00:52:12]

Eric Velasco: What kind of family do you have back where you’re from, where your grandfather’s from?

[00:52:19]

Greg Pappas: Just cousins and one aunt now.

[00:52:27]

Eric Velasco: So that’s a fair contribution to the village.

[00:52:30]

Greg Pappas: Yeah. [laughs] Well, all this, like her family and my family, they—my family, most of them have moved to Thessaloniki, which is the second-largest city in Greece, and, of course, it’s up north.

[00:52:54]

Eric Velasco: That’s where the Touloupis family’s from, right? [Interviewer’s note: Tasos Touloupis, who grew up in Thessaloniki before coming to Alabama, owns Ted’s Restaurant on 12th Street South with his wife, Beba.]

[00:52:56]

Greg Pappas: Mm-hmm. And my wife’s family, they’ve moved from Lefkada to Athens, so most of them live in Athens.

[00:53:09]

Eric Velasco: It’s easy to see them when you fly over there.

[00:53:11]

Greg Pappas: When I was stationed in Germany, I was writing my grandfather, and I had a cousin that was a furrier in Frankfurt, and he looked me up while I was in the service, and we went out all the time. That was great.

[00:53:33]

Eric Velasco: That's neat. A little reunion there in Frankfurt.

[00:53:36]

Greg Pappas: It was.

[00:53:40]

Eric Velasco: So you've been involved with the restaurant scene here for forty-plus years now, forty, fifty years now.

[00:53:51]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:53:54]

Eric Velasco: What impact do you think Greeks have had on Birmingham food and dining?

[00:54:01]

Greg Pappas: A great impact. Back in the day, you didn't have hardly any franchises. Everything was locally owned. You had a few Italian restaurants, mostly Greek-owned restaurants, and Bright Star out in Bessemer, they've been there forever. I think that's the oldest restaurant in the state of Alabama.

[00:54:36]

Eric Velasco: I believe it is. Yes, sir. And chains came in that seemed to be the death of a lot of independent restaurants.

[00:54:45]

Greg Pappas: Mm-hmm.

[00:54:46]

Eric Velasco: But the independent restaurant scene here seems to be picking back up in Birmingham.

[00:54:49]

Greg Pappas: It seems to be. You know, it’s all based on the economy. If the economy’s good, everybody does good.

[00:55:04]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing? What do people need to know about you and your family and Pappas’ Grill?

[00:55:14]

Greg Pappas: We take great satisfaction what we produce. We appreciate everybody that comes in. Everybody’s like family. Cut up with everybody, cook, and we just have a good time.

[00:55:35]

Eric Velasco: You have this open kitchen area here, this open preparation area.

[00:55:38]

Greg Pappas: Yes.

[00:55:39]

Eric Velasco: So I guess there’s a lot of opportunity for interaction.

[00:55:40]

Greg Pappas: Oh, yes, yes.

[00:55:44]

Eric Velasco: Well, listen, I do appreciate you taking the time with us, especially after such a long workweek. We caught you at the end of your week here. I appreciate your spending time with me today.

[00:55:54]

Greg Pappas: Well, that’s no problem. I enjoyed doing it.

[00:55:57]

Eric Velasco: We’re going to pause now for thirty seconds. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]