

Nick Pihakis
Jim 'N Nick's Community Bar-B-Q
Birmingham, Alabama

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Location: Jim 'N Nick's Corporate Office, Birmingham, AL
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Technitype Transcription
Length: Two hours
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[Note: This takes place in a conference room inside a renovated fire station with a large metal front door. Occasionally the door is heard squeaking open and slamming shut 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 Nick Pihakis. He and his father founded Jim ‘N Nick’s Community Bar-B-Q, which now operates in seven states. He is a six-time James Beard Award semi-finalist for outstanding restaurateur, and an influential figure in southern food. It is February 10th, 2017. We’re sitting in a conference room at the Jim ‘N Nick’s corporate office at Vestavia Hills, a Birmingham suburb.

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

[00:00:39]

Nick Pihakis: Okay. I’m Nick Pihakis. That’s N-i-c-k P-i-h-a-k-i-s. Date of birth?

[00:00:55]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:00:56]

Nick Pihakis: August 4th, 1957.

[00:01:00]

Eric Velasco: Now, before we get into your family history, I wanted to start with when you started out in restaurants. Tell us about that, please.

[00:01:08]

Nick Pihakis: Well, I started in when I was nineteen years old, and I knew I wanted to be in the restaurant business since I was fifteen, because I used to go to Miami every year and visit my cousin for like two or three weeks, and we would ride our bikes, go fishing, and we’d always stop by the Fontainebleau Hotel, and I would watch the chefs cooking tableside, and I was just enamored by it. I couldn’t believe it, and I just always felt like that was what I wanted to do. So when I turned nineteen, I was at that time legal to serve alcohol, so I got a bartending job.

[00:01:50]

Eric Velasco: Where was that?

[00:01:51]

Nick Pihakis: It was a restaurant called Rossi’s Italian Restaurant in Birmingham, Alabama.

[00:01:56]

Eric Velasco: And who were the owners?

[00:01:57]

Nick Pihakis: Connie Kanakis was the owner.

[00:01:59]

Eric Velasco: So this was a Greek-owned restaurant that served Italian food.

[00:02:03]

Nick Pihakis: Yes. [*Laughs*]

[00:02:06]

Eric Velasco: Tell us a little bit about Rossi’s. Kind of paint a picture for us.

[00:02:10]

Nick Pihakis: Well, it was these guys, three Greek guys, and they owned Michael’s Sirloin Room, which was an incredible restaurant, and it was on the first floor. Then on the second floor of the building was Rossi’s Italian Restaurant, which they opened for one of their employees. Then they opened a little cantina below it for another employee. And so when I say they were ahead of their time, they had multi-businesses in one building, all Greek. They didn’t get along, so they separated. Greeks have big egos. But they separated, and Connie Kanakis took over Rossi’s. We were twenty-five steps above an iconic restaurant, and, you know, we had to figure out how to get people to walk past Michael’s to come up to our restaurant, so we were real focused on relationships. That’s how we built—our mantra, if you want to call it that, was “People make places.”

[00:03:28]

Eric Velasco: Who were the other Greek restaurants? You mentioned Michael’s.

[00:03:31]

Nick Pihakis: Michael’s was started by a gentleman by the name of Mike Matsos, and then his partner was Ted Kakoliris.

[00:03:40]

Eric Velasco: Could you spell Kakoliris for us, please?

[00:03:42]

Nick Pihakis: No. [*Laughs*] I wouldn’t even begin to try. I think it’s got all the letters in the alphabet in it.

[00:03:50]

Eric Velasco: But both were of Greek extraction?

[00:03:52]

Nick Pihakis: Both of them were, and Mike ended up owning Golden Rule Bar-B-Q as well, and I think they owned it all the way up to about five years ago when they sold it.

[00:04:05]

Eric Velasco: And then Emil’s Cantina?

[00:04:08]

Nick Pihakis: Emil’s Cantina was—Emil was a longtime bartender at Michael’s, and so what their theory was, let’s open up places for our people that supported us and did a great job, so that’s how Rossi’s also came about, was Ross Daidone, Italian, was the chef at Michael’s, and so they opened up the Italian restaurant for him.

[00:04:34]

Eric Velasco: Michael’s was a steakhouse.

[00:04:37]

Nick Pihakis: Correct.

[00:04:39]

Eric Velasco: What kind of food did—it was Italian food, but was it white tablecloth, was it kind of like red-checkered tablecloth?

[00:04:46]

Nick Pihakis: You know, back then, that was in—we opened up Jim ‘N Nick’s in ’85 [1985], so that was ’77. I think steak was \$9 on the menu. It was not an expensive—I mean, maybe back then it seemed like an expensive restaurant, but, you know, pasta was pretty inexpensive. It wasn’t a family restaurant per se, because we were dinner only, but it was like Michael’s in the sense that it was a place that everybody wanted to go to be seen.

[00:05:22]

Eric Velasco: What was the location?

[00:05:23]

Nick Pihakis: Fifth Avenue South and 20th Street. So the nicest hotel in Birmingham was called the Parliament House, and it was across the street, and UAB was just a blip on the radar at that point. [Interviewer’s note: UAB is the University of Alabama at Birmingham.]

So the big draw was sports, and that was what Michael’s basic theme was. So everybody, Bear Bryant, Joe Namath, Kenny Stabler—all the football players would come there and eat, because that’s where Alabama played all their football games.

[00:05:59]

Eric Velasco: They’re located in Tuscaloosa, but at that time, were they playing all their home games or—

[00:06:04]

Nick Pihakis: All their home games was at Legion Field.

[00:06:06]

Eric Velasco: In Birmingham.

[00:06:07]

Nick Pihakis: Correct.

[00:06:10]

Eric Velasco: Now, do you know when Rossi’s opened?

[00:06:13]

Nick Pihakis: We were open, I’d say probably ’70, 1970.

[00:06:28]

Eric Velasco: And how about Emil’s?

[00:06:30]

Nick Pihakis: They were all—the two other restaurants, Emil’s and Rossi’s, were probably open around the same time.

[00:06:37]

Eric Velasco: And the Cantina was more a watering hole?

[00:06:41]

Nick Pihakis: It was a late-night, everybody got off work, and that’s where they went and played the jukebox and ate steak and eggs and drank whiskey and had fun.

[00:06:52]

Eric Velasco: Now, was it more for the service industry, or were the mills still open?

[00:06:56]

Nick Pihakis: I feel like it was more for the service industry, but it was open to the public.

[00:07:03]

Eric Velasco: But what I was talking about with the late night, with the mills I could see where there would’ve been like a second-, third-shift crowd coming in.

[00:07:09]

Nick Pihakis: No, it was more for the restaurant industry, service industry.

[00:07:13]

Eric Velasco: You mentioned several places that were fairly prominent. At the time, there were a fair number of restaurants in Birmingham run by Greeks.

[00:07:25]

Nick Pihakis: There was a lot of restaurants in Birmingham that were run by Greeks and Italians, more so Greeks, but there was absolutely zero chain restaurants back then. First chain restaurant that ever came to Birmingham was TGI Friday’s. Unfortunately, what happened to the single-owned restaurants, the entrepreneurs, is they didn’t pass their businesses to the next generation, and I don’t know if it was because their children felt like that it was too hard of work, they didn’t want to be in that business, they wanted a college education, whatever it was, but as they got older, the Kanakises and the Mike Matsoses and those guys, their clientele got older, and as they got older and died off, their business died off. So there were multiple restaurants that

were here that no longer exist. It’s sad. I mean, the Gold Nugget, Joe’s Ranch House, I said Michael’s, Rossi’s, you know. There was just many, many restaurants that were local owned and independent, and as more and more national restaurants came in and the generational businesses didn’t get passed down, they died off.

[00:09:02]

Eric Velasco: What’s the state of the industry now?

[00:09:05]

Nick Pihakis: I think there was a resurgence of independent-owned restaurants. I think Frank Stitt did a really nice job when he came in and opened up Highlands Bar and Grill.

[Interviewer’s note: Highland Bar and Grill opened in 1982.]

I think that more and more people started seeing the restaurant business as, you know, Food TV Channel came in, and it went from being, I don’t know, second class to being, you know, a celebrity, and I think a lot of people viewed it that way. It’s a good business. It’s a thriving industry. Everybody has to eat, and it’s one of the lowest forms of entertainment. You know, you go eat, go see a movie. That’s what people did when 9/11 happened. They didn’t want to go anywhere, so they wanted to stay together with their families, and so they came out and ate and they went to movies and they stayed close to home. That was always a big deal when I was growing up, is we ate at home every night, but, boy, it was a celebration when we could go out to dinner.

[00:10:16]

Eric Velasco: What kind of places would you go out to eat?

[00:10:18]

Nick Pihakis: The independent, you know. It was more about who we knew, and let’s go see Mike at Michael’s, or let’s go see Joe at Joe’s Ranch House. It was always somebody that we knew, and you go in and one of the things that people love, love, love, love, is to be recognized. You walk into a restaurant and the owner walks up and shakes your hand and thanks you for being there, you think you’re the greatest thing that ever happened. So that was a good thing. It was very family oriented with all of the immigrants being in Birmingham and working together, it seemed. They went to church together. They were in the same industry. So it was a big community affair.

[00:11:11]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about Joe. He’s definitely come up much in these.

[00:11:13]

Nick Pihakis: I didn’t really know him.

[00:11:17]

Eric Velasco: What’s his last name?

[00:11:18]

Nick Pihakis: I don’t know.

[00:11:19]

Eric Velasco: Joe. Now, let’s move on to your dad.

[00:11:24]

Nick Pihakis: Okay.

[00:11:24]

Eric Velasco: Tell us what your dad’s name is.

[00:11:26]

Nick Pihakis: His name is Jim—or was Jim Pihakis, and he was in the insurance business for as long as I can remember. He loved the restaurant, and my cousin, his first cousin, and he went down to Florida because my cousin’s brother had a stroke, and they had to keep his restaurant going until they could sell it. They went down there and worked a season, and he came back and he said, “It’s the most fun I’ve ever had.”

[00:12:09]

Eric Velasco: When was this?

[00:12:10]

Nick Pihakis: This was in—we opened Jim ‘N Nick’s in ’85, so this was in ’84.

[00:12:15]

Eric Velasco: This is part of what inspired you two opening a restaurant together?

[00:12:19]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[00:12:22]

Eric Velasco: Let’s back up a little bit. Where was your dad born?

[00:12:24]

Nick Pihakis: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

[00:12:26]

Eric Velasco: And were his parents both Greek?

[00:12:28]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[00:12:30]

Eric Velasco: Where were they born?

[00:12:32]

Nick Pihakis: In Greece.

[00:12:33]

Eric Velasco: Where in Greece?

[00:12:34]

Nick Pihakis: I’ll think of the name of the island in just a second.

[00:12:41]

Eric Velasco: Okay. And then what brought him down to Birmingham?

[00:12:46]

Nick Pihakis: His brother lived here and was in the insurance business, and he brought him down. My dad was a teacher in Pennsylvania, and so he came down to work with his brother.

[00:12:58]

Eric Velasco: What did he teach?

[00:12:59]

Nick Pihakis: He was a physical education.

[00:13:03]

Eric Velasco: Was he an athlete?

[00:13:04]

Nick Pihakis: He was a wrestler.

[00:13:06]

Eric Velasco: Interesting.

[00:13:08]

Nick Pihakis: Yes. It’s a tough sport.

[00:13:11]

Eric Velasco: It’s a very tough sport.

[00:13:12]

Nick Pihakis: It’s very popular up north.

[00:13:18]

Eric Velasco: Did he wrestle college-level or anything like that?

[00:13:21]

Nick Pihakis: He went to Michigan State, and I believe he did, but he also went into the—was drafted and was shot in the war.

[00:13:34]

Eric Velasco: Which war?

[00:13:35]

Nick Pihakis: Two. And, you know, back then they didn’t have the medical facilities that they have today, or the knowledge, so he was in the hospital for like six months. So when he got out, obviously, he couldn’t coach anymore, and so that’s how he—he came back and started teaching. I think he was an English teacher, and he basically coached. He was the athletic director for the high school up there.

[00:14:15]

Eric Velasco: That’s how you supplemented your income?

[00:14:17]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah. I think he made \$17,000 a year.

[00:14:21]

Eric Velasco: Oh, my goodness.

[00:14:23]

Nick Pihakis: [*Laughs*] My wife spends that a month.

[00:14:26]

Eric Velasco: Now, was he in the army?

[00:14:27]

Nick Pihakis: He was in the army.

[00:14:28]

Eric Velasco: Where was he shot, both physically and what country?

[00:14:34]

Nick Pihakis: He was shot in the knee, and I do not know what country he was in. But he was parachuting, and when he came down, shrapnel hit him, hit his knee. I don't know what country he was in.

[00:14:55]

Eric Velasco: But it was Europe?

[00:14:56]

Nick Pihakis: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, it wasn't a practice run. It was the real deal. [*Laughs*]

[00:15:03]

Eric Velasco: I had some uncles in the Pacific theater.

Now, what kind of insurance did he sell?

[00:15:09]

Nick Pihakis: Life insurance.

[00:15:10]

Eric Velasco: Was he in partnership with his brother?

[00:15:11]

Nick Pihakis: He was.

[00:15:13]

Eric Velasco: What’s his brother’s name?

[00:15:14]

Nick Pihakis: George.

[00:15:17]

Eric Velasco: And just out of curiosity, was your dad named for anybody in the family?

[00:15:24]

Nick Pihakis: Well, there’s a way that the Greeks do it, which is your firstborn son’s first name is your middle name, and your first name is his middle name. So he was James Nick Pihakis, and so when my brother was born, my dad was mean as a snake, and he told my mom, he said, “He’s not good-looking enough to have my name.” [*Laughs*] So he named him James, but he named him James after him, not Nick James. Then when I was born, he named me after my grandfather, and so it was kind of screwy. But there’s a very systematic way that Greeks do the naming of their children.

[00:16:33]

Eric Velasco: So neither one of you were pretty enough at birth?

[00:16:36]

Nick Pihakis: No, I was beautiful, and that’s why he named me after his dad. [*Laughter*] He’s crazy.

[00:16:45]

Eric Velasco: Now, who were your dad’s and your uncle’s customers?

[00:16:48]

Nick Pihakis: You know, the average person. I mean, they went out and sold life insurance every day. Back then, you know, there wasn’t all the complications of trusts and family planning

as much as it is today, so it was more whole life, straightforward insurance that they went out and sold, businessmen, families. I mean, they literally knocked on doors.

[00:17:18]

Eric Velasco: So it wasn't an office they went to; they rode a circuit, in a sense.

[00:17:22]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah. I mean, they had an office, but I'm saying that they had salesmen, but they went out and they hustled. They had to. And, you know, they got commission off of their sales. He was an executive in the company, but pretty much all the salesmen, if I remember correctly, were straight commission. So, I mean, they really had to hustle.

[00:17:46]

Eric Velasco: Or you don't earn.

[00:17:48]

Nick Pihakis: That's right.

[00:17:49]

Eric Velasco: Now, your mother, what was her name?

[00:17:55]

Nick Pihakis: Dorothy Pihakis.

[00:17:58]

Eric Velasco: And where is she from?

[00:18:01]

Nick Pihakis: She was from Pittsburgh as well.

[00:18:03]

Eric Velasco: Is she Greek?

[00:18:04]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[00:18:06]

Eric Velasco: And where were her parents from?

[00:18:07]

Nick Pihakis: From Greece.

[00:18:09]

Eric Velasco: From Greece. *[Laughter]* Now, how did your parents meet?

[00:18:15]

Nick Pihakis: You know, they met—you know, again, everybody that was in those communities would go to the same church, and they met either in church or just in functions, you know. Back then, you didn’t get around like you get around now, so it wasn’t as transient. Some people did things in the community, and there was a lot of—what they told me, a lot of pedestrian happenings. People would live in the town. They would entertain in the town. They weren’t living in a suburb and driving all the way into the city. They were living in the city, and all their functions. So I’m sure they ran into—neither one of them drank, so it wasn’t a nightclub or anything like that. My mother was a singer, and so, you know, he may have gone to an event, she was singing, and fell in love.

[00:19:19]

Eric Velasco: What kind of music did she sing?

[00:19:20]

Nick Pihakis: Like big band music.

[00:19:23]

Eric Velasco: Oh, that’s neat.

[00:19:25]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah.

[00:19:25]

Eric Velasco: Now, so obviously they were married before they moved down here.

[00:19:29]

Nick Pihakis: Correct.

[00:19:30]

Eric Velasco: Had they had any children?

[00:19:31]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[00:19:33]

Eric Velasco: Walk us through your siblings, please.

[00:19:35]

Nick Pihakis: I’m the youngest. I have two sisters and a brother. Oldest sister, second is my brother, and then my next sister, and then me.

[00:19:50]

Eric Velasco: What are their names?

[00:19:51]

Nick Pihakis: Cathy, James, Barbara, and then me.

[00:19:59]

Eric Velasco: Is it Cathy with a *K* or a *C*?

[00:20:01]

Nick Pihakis: *C*.

[00:20:02]

Eric Velasco: Do any of them live down here?

[00:20:04]

Nick Pihakis: Cathy lives in Nashville, and Barbara and Jimmy live here.

[00:20:08]

Eric Velasco: What do they all do?

[00:20:09]

Nick Pihakis: Cathy is an aspiring music producer, which she never will be more than that.

[*Laughs*] God bless her, she works at it real hard. My brother’s retired, so he goes to the mailbox once a month and gets his retirement money. And my other sister is basically retired as well.

[00:20:38]

Eric Velasco: So when did your family come here?

[00:20:40]

Nick Pihakis: Let me do the math. So '70, sixties, I'm not sure.

[00:21:02]

Eric Velasco: Well, you were born here in '57?

[00:21:04]

Nick Pihakis: I was born in Pittsburgh, and I was two when we came here. So I'm fifty-nine, and so they came to Birmingham in 1960.

[00:21:24]

Eric Velasco: 1960. Describe growing up in Birmingham when you were young. This would have been elementary school in the sixties, and probably more like middle school in the early seventies.

[00:21:39]

Nick Pihakis: Well, I graduated in '75, so it was probably before [unclear]. But I lived in a small community called Cahaba Heights, which we rode our bikes to school every day, you know. It was safe. The kids I went to school with in Cahaba Heights we went all the way

through high school together because of the way the school system was set up. When I got to high school, I went to Shades Valley High School. They had just separated Shades Valley and built Homewood High School. So it really separated that schools, the friends and people we grew up with. So it was interesting. It wasn't as racist as—that's the thing that—not that you asked me this question, but, you know, Birmingham seems to have never been able to shake that sort of racial feeling or the way people perceive it, but it wasn't. I mean, it just wasn't. It didn't exist, at least in my world.

[00:23:04]

Eric Velasco: And I was always curious, because the Greeks in Birmingham and the other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean immigrants here kind of give a more nuanced view of what's normally seen in black and white. How were your dad and you viewed in mainstream society at the time?

[00:23:27]

Nick Pihakis: You know, I think that when we opened our restaurant, I think that people expected the food to be great and the service to be impeccable, because that's what they got from independent-owned restaurants, and most of them were owned by Greeks. So the expectation is we were more community- and service-driven and cared passionately about what we did.

Growing up, you know how you have to do when you're in school and it's day one and they say, "Stand up and say your name." I would always be real embarrassed because I'd be like, "Nick Pihakis," and everybody would laugh at my last name, which I thought was funny. But they didn't put any merit to what we were when I was growing up, just when we got into

business, the expectations seemed to be that people thought, “Hey, it’s a Greek-run restaurant, it’s got to be good and food’s got to be great. Service is going to be great, because they’re always so friendly.” So I think that’s how people viewed us in the later years.

[00:24:47]

Eric Velasco: Valued.

[00:24:49]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[00:24:52]

Eric Velasco: What did you eat growing up at home?

[00:24:54]

Nick Pihakis: You know, my mom, God rest her soul, she wasn’t a very good cook. My grandmother was a *great* cook, and she would always make very traditional Greek dishes, which we always looked forward to going and eating with her. And my oldest sister has sort of taken that and kept that fire going. Dolmades and Pastitsio and just Greek chicken and, you know, fish, just all those real traditional Greek dishes, always looked forward to that. Other than that, we didn’t have a whole lot of money, and so my mother would scrape together whatever she could, and that’s what we ate.

[00:25:47]

Eric Velasco: A lot of ground beef.

[00:25:48]

Nick Pihakis: A lot of ground beef. [*Laughs*]

[00:25:51]

Eric Velasco: I remember as a child—I was born in 1960—we had a cookbook, *365 Ways to Cook Ground Beef*. [*Laughter*]

[00:25:57]

Nick Pihakis: That’s pretty funny.

[00:26:01]

Eric Velasco: It was less funny at the time.

[00:26:03]

Nick Pihakis: Yes, I can imagine.

[00:26:06]

Eric Velasco: Now, what kind of interaction did your family have with other Greeks? You mentioned you knew several of the restaurateurs.

[00:26:16]

Nick Pihakis: You know, it’s funny because not one Greek that I’ve known coming up in the restaurant business celebrated when another Greek came into their restaurant, because they knew they were going to get criticized to hell and back, and it wasn’t going to be right, and nobody could cook the food better than they could cook it. So it was kind of a funny relationship between the Greeks, but yet they were very close. I mean, you know, look, we do this Greek Festival every year at the church, which I’m not involved with it as I once was, but, I mean, they raise 300,000 or 400,000 dollars in two and a half days of people wanting that food.

[00:27:04]

Eric Velasco: Give people an idea just how big a deal that festival is here.

[00:27:08]

Nick Pihakis: It’s *huge*. I mean, you’ve got to figure to do that much business in two and a half days, they put a temporary drive-thru where you can pull up and they’ve got your food. You go inside, there’s three floors of food and beverage. The bank actually puts an 18-wheeler ATM outside for people to get money, and I think this year they started taking credit cards, but up until this year, I don’t think they even took credit cards. You can imagine, to put that in perspective, that’s probably on the average, restaurants do 60,000 to 70,000 dollars a week in sales. I mean, there’s \$100,000-a-week restaurants, obviously, but to do \$350,000 in two and a half days, that’s a *lot* of people.

[00:28:08]

Eric Velasco: Who’s doing all the cooking?

[00:28:09]

Nick Pihakis: All the older women of the church. I shouldn’t say “older,” because I’m old. But they start cooking, and they just time it all out, and by the time it’s ready to go, all the men do all the meats, like they do at home, grilling and baking, and the ladies of the church do the side items and the desserts. And then the kids, if you want to call them kids, the younger generation, next generation, typically are the heavy lifters. They’re loading and unloading ovens, and the elders have to check it to make sure it’s done. It’s funny. It’s a fun fair.

[00:29:02]

Eric Velasco: And this is a benefit for?

[00:29:03]

Nick Pihakis: For the Greek Orthodox Church.

[00:29:06]

Eric Velasco: Which is named?

[00:29:07]

Nick Pihakis: The Greek Orthodox Church. [*Laughs*] [Interviewer’s note: Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral.]

[00:29:10]

Eric Velasco: The Greek Orthodox Church. Now, were you active in the church? Was your family active?

[00:29:15]

Nick Pihakis: I was for a pretty long time, and as I married a good Catholic girl and, you know, you do what your wife tells you to do, and so my kids went to Catholic school, and so we got more involved with the Catholic school and—I’m stumbling here because you asked me a question earlier, and I wanted to answer. Our family is from Rhodes. [Interviewer’s note: Mr. Pihakis apparently had texted someone for the information. He was “stumbling” as he checked his phone.]

[00:29:51]

Eric Velasco: Rhodes. Thank you.

[00:29:51]

Nick Pihakis: So we got more involved with the Catholic side, which pulled me away from the Greek Church, and we moved out into the suburbs and our kids went to the Catholic school out there, and so we just sort of wound down from the daily activities of the Greek Church. But we still support them.

Eric Velasco: Your children went to John Carroll?

[00:30:17]

Nick Pihakis: My kids went to OLV. One of my children went to John Carroll, and the other two went to Indian Springs. [Interviewer’s note: John Carroll and OLV (Our Lady of the Valley) are Catholic schools. Indian Springs is a private prep school with boarders and local students.]

[00:30:28]

Eric Velasco: You said you were involved at some point in the Greek Festival.

[00:30:35]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[00:30:37]

Eric Velasco: What was your involvement?

[00:30:38]

Nick Pihakis: Just cooking. We cooked lamb out on the grill, we baked chicken in the oven, and that’s basically what most of the guys do. I tried as hard as I could to work the bar, but they didn’t like that too much.

[00:30:53]

Eric Velasco: How did you learn to cook?

[00:30:55]

Nick Pihakis: You know, it was trial and error. I worked at Rossi’s. I got a job there when I was nineteen years old, like I said earlier, and I got a job as a bartender. I walked in the door, scared to death, and the guy that was working behind the bar was a Greek guy also, and he was going to train me. He took off his vest and he put it on me, and he said, “Yeah, it fits. See you later.”

And I was like, “You got to be kidding me.” [*Laughs*]

So the first couple that came in, most of the people that ate there were very fluent, and this older couple came in and sat down, and they ate there every week. And the guy said, “I’ll take an Old-fashioned.”

And I was like, “Okay.” So my choices were to grab the Mr. Boston [*Laughs*] recipe book or just try to bumble, fumble around and try to figure out how to make it. And so I turned around and I looked at the guy and I said, “You know, there’s so many different ways to make an Old-fashioned. Why don’t you tell me how you like yours.”

And he goes, “You don’t know how to make an Old-fashioned, do you?”

And I went, “No.”

So he took his jacket off, rolled his sleeves up, and he came behind the bar and he taught me how to make an Old-fashioned.

And the owner, Connie, walked out of his office, and he was like, “What are you doing?”

And the guy goes, “Man, you shouldn’t put bartenders back here who don’t know what they’re doing.” And so that guy became one of my best customers. It was awesome. It was a

great way to develop a relationship, and it taught me how to develop relationships with people that came to the bar. But my hours were four to close and—

[00:32:53]

Eric Velasco: And when was closing?

[00:32:54]

Nick Pihakis: Eleven o’clock, and, you know, it took us an hour, whatever, to get out of there. But the cooks got there at eleven, and so I just said, “I’d like to come at eleven and learn what they’re doing in the kitchen.” So I went every day.

He said, “You can come. I’m not going to pay you for it. Your job is four to close, but if you want to come and learn, you can come and learn.” So I just went there every day and, you know, learned how to cut fish, and that was most of my training and exposure to actually being in a kitchen, commercial kitchen.

[00:33:31]

Eric Velasco: At this point, you’re actively pursuing that interest you had developed down in Florida.

[00:33:35]

Nick Pihakis: Well, that was my dad that went to Florida. But, no, oh, you’re talking about from Miami—

[00:33:42]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:33:42]

Nick Pihakis: Yes. Yeah, I knew that’s what I wanted to do. There’s no question about it. So, you know, I just kept reading books and studying. And like I said, Frank Stitt opened up Highlands Bar and Grill, and I became friends with a couple of the sous chefs up there and talked to them a lot.

So when we opened up our barbecue restaurant, we had a gentleman that worked with my dad in the insurance business. He actually was in the barbecue business for, I don’t know, forty years, and he closed them and started selling insurance and got back into the barbecue business. And he told my dad, he said—we bought a pizza place, and like a month after we bought it, the corporate office sent us a letter and said, “Take the signs down. They can’t transfer franchises.”

So we’re like, “Okay, we’ve got a pizza restaurant with no name, and nobody knows who we are.”

So I went up to—the guy’s name is Johnny Ray, and I went up to Johnny Ray’s and I worked for a couple days, and he had a guy that was working for him, Phillip Adrey, and Phillip worked at Ollie’s. He was the pitmaster at Ollie’s, and he said, “Let me go with Nick, and I’ll teach him how to cook barbecue and how to take care of the meat and all.” I figured out all the trimmings, and he taught me how to cook. Back then, you know, it was all I could do to keep up with—you know, he was seventy-two and my dad was in his sixties, so it was like, you know, “You’re the man.” [Laughs] So I had to learn every aspect of it, and it was on-the-job training.

But over the years, our recipes have evolved, and we still use the same barbecue sauce, same baked beans, you know. We added—what we did was we listened to our guests, and, you

know, they would come in and, “I can’t eat barbecue anymore, but I love y’all. You’ve got to put something else on the menu.”

And I’d say, “What do you want me to put on the menu?”

And they would say, “Turkey sandwich,” or a burger, whatever, and we would add it, and so our menu grew in to where it is today.

[00:36:14]

Eric Velasco: How did you develop your original recipes?

[00:36:19]

Nick Pihakis: Just trial and error, just kept making them, making, you know, the baked beans and potato salad and the coleslaw until—like these two guys that came in, they ate there every day, and the one guy goes, “You’ve *got* to put something else on your menu.”

And I was like, “What should I put on there?”

And he said, “There’s this place that used to be up and around the corner that did this turkey sandwich with this honey mustard sauce.”

I just called my wife and I said, “Look up every honey mustard sauce recipe you can find.” So she sent me like five of them, and I just started putting things together, and that’s the honey mustard we use today.

[00:37:02]

Eric Velasco: And she was rifling through cookbooks? Or—

[00:37:04]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

[00:37:06]

Eric Velasco: This was pre-Internet.

[00:37:08]

Nick Pihakis: That’s what you do.

[00:37:13]

Eric Velasco: Backing up a second, what other restaurants did you work at besides Rossi’s?

[00:37:18]

Nick Pihakis: I worked at John’s for three months while we were putting Jim ‘N Nick’s together, and I worked at—that was it.

[00:37:31]

Eric Velasco: Who was running John’s at the time?

[00:37:32]

Nick Pihakis: Jimmy Hontzas. So the three brothers, there was George, Jimmy, and Phil. Phil had an aneurism, died. Jimmy had what was back then was Alabama Seafood, and George ran Niki’s on Second Avenue North. They were all nephews of John Proferis, which started John’s Restaurant. So when Phil passed away, Jimmy moved from Alabama Seafood to John’s to run it,

and George Sarris took over Alabama Seafood and renamed it as the Fish Market, and that’s what the Fish Market is today.

[00:38:18]

Eric Velasco: And George and Mr. Hontzas were related as well. [Interviewer’s note: The “George” in this case is George C. Sarris, owner of Fish Market Southside.]

[00:38:23]

Nick Pihakis: Oh, yeah, yeah, they were all related. So, you know, it was a tough time. They’d just built—they went from an eighty-seat restaurant to a 450-seat restaurant, and it was hard. It was *really* hard work. But, again, I learned a lot there. I learned—I mean, they did a lot of business.

[00:38:49]

Eric Velasco: What did you do at John’s?

[00:38:50]

Nick Pihakis: I ran what they called their banquet facility, which was upstairs. Every day they had banquets in there, Kiwanis Club and whatever. And then I helped at dinner. I would help Jimmy host, because he would get there at nine o’clock in the morning and he’d stay until close every day, and he’d host. He was the host.

[00:39:18]

Eric Velasco: When was closing?

[00:39:20]

Nick Pihakis: Ten o’clock, and they didn’t care if there was 100 people standing outside, they’d lock the door at ten o’clock. That was it. [*Laughs*]

[00:39:27]

Eric Velasco: Our day is done.

[00:39:29]

Nick Pihakis: But I’ve never seen any three people work as hard as those three guys. They just—you know, and it killed two of them. George, I think, ended up moving back to Greece.

[Interviewer’s note: George Hontzas.]

He sold Niki’s. I mean, they had enough money, they could hire a host to seat people, but they felt like that was part of the hospitality of that restaurant.

[00:40:00]

Eric Velasco: And then for listeners, another cousin of theirs, Gus Hontzas, was Niki’s West.

[00:40:07]

Nick Pihakis: Correct. And therein lies the fact that he passed that business on to his children, and they’re now running it and they do a great job, and that’s why that business is still there. It’s

very—you know, and that’s why all three of my kids work with me, because I want to make sure that they continue on with what we’ve done.

[00:40:32]

Eric Velasco: Well, let’s skip ahead to that.

[00:40:33]

Nick Pihakis: Okay.

[00:40:33]

Eric Velasco: Who are your three children? What are their names and ages?

[00:40:36]

Nick Pihakis: Constance is thirty-two. She’s married, she’s having her second child, so she gave us our first grandchild nineteen months ago. My middle child, his name’s Nicholas, and he’s thirty, just turned thirty February 2nd. And then my youngest is Catherine, and she’ll turn twenty-five February 18th.

[00:41:08]

Eric Velasco: And that’s Catherine with a C?

[00:41:10]

Nick Pihakis: C.

[00:41:10]

Eric Velasco: And what do they do with you? What do they do at Jim ‘N Nick’s?

[00:41:17]

Nick Pihakis: Well, what I did was several years ago I started my own company, which is called Pihakis Investment Group, which stands for PIG. So we do a lot of other restaurants besides just Jim ‘N Nick’s. We’ve got twelve brands that we operate. So Constance does our accounting, our bookkeeping. She’s not an accountant. She does our bookkeeping. Nicholas does our IT and operations. And then Catherine does front of the house and writes the manuals and things like that.

[00:41:59]

Eric Velasco: And your wife’s name?

[00:42:01]

Nick Pihakis: Suzanne.

[00:42:06]

Eric Velasco: And what’s her background?

[00:42:08]

Nick Pihakis: She went to—her grandfather was the physical education director at Texas A&M when they hired Bear Bryant. So they have a long history of A&M. Her dad went to Texas

A&M, military. He was stationed in Norris, Tennessee, met Suzanne’s mom. He got on a ship, went to Japan, he was in the military, and asked her to marry him, and at age seventeen, Suzanne’s mom got on a ship and went to Japan and married Ward. They’ve been married ever since. I think Ward’s eighty-six, she’s eighty-three.

So when he got out of the military, he got his master’s and then his doctorate, and he’s in physical education, and he got a job at the University of Montevallo. So my wife was born in Texas, but they moved to Montevallo. She went to school at Montevallo, and then she was in the first female class of Indian Springs. It used to be an all-male school. And then went to the University of Alabama.

[00:43:38]

Eric Velasco: And for listeners, Indian Springs is?

[00:43:40]

Nick Pihakis: Indian Springs is a private school. It’s a boarding school. It’s probably in the top ten in the United States from an educational standpoint. It’s incredible. They get people from all over the world that come to that school. They’ve got a huge endowment. They just redid the whole school. It’s been around for sixty, seventy years. They’ve got 300 acres. It’s absolutely gorgeous. It’s eight through twelve. There’s probably 350 students in the whole school; very small. Just put it this way, at the beginning of every year, they list all of the kids that graduated and where they got accepted in school to go further their education, college, and it’s Yale, Harvard, Penn. I mean, it’s a great school. Birmingham’s very lucky to have it.

[00:45:01]

Eric Velasco: Talk to me about the early days of Jim ‘N Nick’s. Where was your original location?

[00:45:08]

Nick Pihakis: Original location was on Clairmont Avenue, which is right where Clairmont and Highland Avenue split, and Highland Golf Course, right across the street from us. It’s in Southside, really, really bad neighborhood when we first opened. I mean bad. And then, you know, it skipped over, and then there’s Forest Park, which is a really, really nice area. So we were sort of caught in the in between.

It was just my dad and myself. We opened the doors. We had Phillip in the back, which, like I said, he was seventy-two, so he couldn’t do very much, but he had the knowledge. So I would go in every day and I’d set the kitchen up, and I was the cook. The first employee I hired was a former prostitute and drug addict, and she came from a place around the corner from us called the Aletheia House, and they actually came down and certified us to allow the people that were staying there to work for us, because we served alcohol. We served beer. It was—what do you call it? They go through drug treatment and they go to this house and they live there, and they have a certain period of time that they can stay there, find a job, and then they move them out.

[00:46:50]

Eric Velasco: Halfway house.

[00:46:51]

Nick Pihakis: Halfway house.

[00:46:52]

Eric Velasco: Why her?

[00:46:55]

Nick Pihakis: She just came in and she just had the spunk, and I thought, “You know, what a great story that she’s made it this far. I want to give her a chance.” So we hired a lot of people from there, and they told us when we did it that one out of ten would make it, and I think we probably ended up hiring about twenty-five people over the course of years, and it *was* about one out of ten made it. But then I hired a young man and he worked in the kitchen, so it was the four of us. It was my dad, Phillip, Dawn, and Reginald. I’ve got to say this, because my wife says I never mention her name, she worked there every day too.

[00:47:44]

Eric Velasco: What did she do?

[00:47:47]

Nick Pihakis: She helped in the front of the house and worked the register. I mean, we couldn’t afford help, and so every day at two o’clock we would close the restaurant, and my dad and I

would wash all the dishes so we could open up for dinner. So, I mean, it was like—it was tough. But we got two really big breaks. A lady by the name of Sue Burnham was in charge of the Mountain Brook Board of Education, and they were doing a fundraiser and it was 10,000 pounds of pork. So I went up and I interviewed, and she came to our restaurant. She looked at our restaurant. She said, “You can’t do this.”

And I said, “If you let me do it and we fail, it’s free.” So I would cook twenty-four hours a day and at Avondale Park on this cinderblock pit that was like 20 feet long, and we had to slice every bit of the pork and put it in one-pound bags, and we did it.

[00:48:52]

Eric Velasco: How long did it take?

[00:48:53]

Nick Pihakis: It was three days.

[00:48:55]

Eric Velasco: Did you go straight through?

[00:48:56]

Nick Pihakis: Straight through.

[00:48:57]

Eric Velasco: Wow!

[00:48:58]

Nick Pihakis: We’d sleep in booths, you know. I mean, it was horrific, but we did it, which was a huge break, because now we opened the doors for one of the most affluent areas in Birmingham.

[00:49:12]

Eric Velasco: And Avondale Park now has been refurbished and it’s all beautiful. It was pretty sketchy back then.

[00:49:18]

Nick Pihakis: Oh, yeah. Oh, it was terrible. It was terrible. I had a big gun.

Then the second break we got was this guy that he was a little slow, but his job, he was a host at a restaurant right up the street from us. It was called GG’s in the Park. It was Italian. But anyway, he would come down and eat lunch before he went to work every day, and he came up to me and he said that University of Alabama was redoing their field at Bryant-Denny, and he said, “They’re going to play all their home games at Legion Field for two years.” And he said, “You should bid on feeding the Tide Pride,” which is their donors. It’s like 2,500 people per game. And we bid on it and we got it, and so for two years we got that exposure. So those two things. [Interviewer’s note: Bryant-Denny is the University of Alabama’s campus football stadium in Tuscaloosa. Legion Field is in Birmingham.]

There was Johnny Ray’s, there was Golden Rule, there was—who else was there? There were a couple other barbecue restaurants in Birmingham that really owned the barbecue world, and we were new and trying to crack into it, and we finally did once we got past those two events that changed everything for us.

[00:50:45]

Eric Velasco: What kind of barbecue were you doing? What were you barbecuing early on?

[00:50:50]

Nick Pihakis: Our first proteins were pork, chicken, and ribs. Then we added beef and then we added turkey, and then, of course, we started doing burgers and things like that. But pork has always been our big deal.

But I’ve got to tell the story about my wife again, because she said I never mention her. So when she went into labor with my son, it was five-thirty in the morning. So I put her in the car, and there’s a McDonald’s right down the street from our restaurant and they just started breakfast, and there was like four items on the menu. So I bought her one of each item and I put her in a booth at the restaurant, and I set the whole kitchen up, got the fire going, got the meat on, got the beans in the oven, I got everything done, and then when the first employee got there at nine, I took her to the hospital.

[00:51:56]

Eric Velasco: St. Vincent’s? [Interviewer’s note: St. Vincent’s Hospital is several blocks down the street from the restaurant.]

[00:51:58]

Nick Pihakis: It was actually Brookwood.

[00:52:01]

Eric Velasco: Wow!

[00:52:02]

Nick Pihakis: So I tell that story because to me it was pretty funny. It worked out because she eventually had Nicholas, it was like 12:15 the next morning, midnight. But for her to have to sit there for four and a half hours, and they say the one thing you shouldn’t do is eat before you go.

[*Laughs*] So I’m sitting there feeding her and she’s sitting there in labor.

[00:52:33]

Eric Velasco: Eating Egg McMuffins.

[00:52:35]

Nick Pihakis: But that’s—you know, that’s the way it was.

[00:52:40]

Eric Velasco: Did you work the dinner shift that day?

[00:52:42]

Nick Pihakis: No, I stayed at the hospital. But this generation today would not do that. I don't think they would. But we didn't have a choice.

[00:52:59]

Eric Velasco: Not many people you could have called in then.

[00:53:02]

Nick Pihakis: No, there was nobody. My dad.

[00:53:06]

Eric Velasco: How long did your dad work there?

[00:53:09]

Nick Pihakis: We opened up our second location in '90 in Riverchase, and a guy that owned the building was a bookie and he owed the IRS a million dollars. [Interviewer's note: Riverchase is a residential/commercial planned development in the suburban municipality Hoover, straddling the Jefferson and Shelby county line.]

They came in and they did a calculation on our lease, and we had like three years and three months left on our lease, and they said, "We're going to divide this up into thirteen ninety-

day leases, and every ninety days we can come in and kick you out.” And what they were doing is they were going auction the property.

So we went down the street. There was a restaurant around the corner from us, and that’s where our restaurant still is today. But a couple guys that were in the Wendy’s business that had sold their Wendy’s and they had opened up a small restaurant, it was called Lubo’s [phonetic]. One of them lived in Colorado, one of them lived in Florida. And we went down there, and it just so happened Mike Bodnar, which is our partner today, was in there, and we were like, “Do you want to sell this place?”

And he said, “No, I don’t want to sell it. Where are you guys from?”

We told him, “Jim ‘N Nick’s.”

He goes, “I love Jim ‘N Nick’s. We always eat there when we come into town. Why don’t we partner up and just do this together.”

So we closed on a Sunday night, or Saturday night, and we reopened on Tuesday and moved our business from the [Alabama highway] 150 location to the [U.S.] 31 location, where it is today. So that was in ’93. Then we opened up our Homewood location, and it just was terrible, I mean just terrible. It wasn’t successful at all. So we worked that for five years, and in ’99, we opened up [U.S.] 280, and my dad passed away in 2000.

[00:55:31]

Eric Velasco: Did he continue working there up until his death?

[00:55:34]

Nick Pihakis: No, he didn’t work very much the last couple years, but we weren’t really successful until we opened up our Trussville store. I mean, we were moderately successful, but once we opened up our Trussville store, that gave us five restaurants in Birmingham, and so where you lived or where you worked, there was a Jim ‘N Nick’s there, and so we really took off after that.

[00:56:01]

Eric Velasco: That really is one of the changes that we’ve seen in the business, especially the barbecue business over the decades, is that back in the sixties it was kind of a regional thing. If you lived near Ollie’s, you ate there. If you lived near Golden Rule, you ate there. If you lived near Demitri’s, you ate there. To be successful more in the eighties and nineties, it looked like you had to go to people everywhere and go to critical mass in that sense.

[00:56:31]

Nick Pihakis: Sure. Yeah, to get your brand out there, you’ve got to be able to penetrate the market. We started a program called the Local Owner Program when we wanted to go out of town, because I just couldn’t do any more than what I was doing. And we didn’t want a franchise and we didn’t want to have a bunch of upper management, so we—and one of the reasons I left Rossi’s, going back to that, was we were all promised that we were going to open up more restaurants, and Connie never did. So I had a lot of really good employees that were working with me, and I knew if I didn’t give them an opportunity, they would leave. So our first restaurant that we put an operating partner was in Jasper, and a Greek guy that works with me,

Paul Liollio, was our first operating partner. He went out to Jasper and opened it up. We were really successful with it.

So our second one was in Atlanta, and it was the first time we brought an outside partner in, because with the people that were working with us, we just didn’t have anybody ready to do it at the time, and he was from Atlanta and he’d been in the restaurant business for years. So, you know, when we’d go open up, like when we went and opened up in Atlanta, nobody knew who Jim ‘N Nick’s was, and until—we’ve got six or seven stores there now, which Atlanta’s so big that you could have twenty-seven stores there and people wouldn’t know who you are. But we have a much bigger and broader reputation and clientele there because of the multiple locations.

[00:58:27]

Eric Velasco: And how many states are you in now? How many restaurants do you have?

[00:58:30]

Nick Pihakis: We have thirty-seven. We’re in the process of building five more. And we’re in seven states. So we’re as far as from Colorado to South Carolina. Most of them are in the Southeast. Well, all of them are except for the Colorado.

[00:58:52]

Eric Velasco: How’d you wind up in Colorado?

[00:58:54]

Nick Pihakis: My partner, Mike Bodnar, had a home out there, and we’d go out there and go fishing, and I just thought it was just a beautiful area, and I knew he spent time out there. So we just felt like it was a good start to what was our brand, what was our identity. Are we a regional brand or are we a national brand? When you’re looking at business, you know, a national brand is obviously much more valuable than a regional brand.

And at the time, we were all in this transition, a transitional period of going away from—you know, if you do beef brisket, you go to Texas. If you do whole hog, you go to Carolina. And, you know, ribs, Memphis. Everything became so much more transient, that we did all the proteins. So you could get beef brisket in Birmingham or you could get it in South Carolina or you could get ribs. So, you know, it wasn’t something that people would go, “What are you doing out here?” This was brisket land, and you’re from the South, you’re pork, you know. It just wasn’t like that. So we wanted to see, you know, how did our brand travel, and we’ve got four restaurants out there now.

[01:00:28]

Eric Velasco: It seemed to travel well.

[01:00:29]

Nick Pihakis: It has. It’s much more expensive to do business out there, but it’s a great town. I mean, when they built that new airport, it just changed everything for that city. But that city, it’s like Nashville and it’s like Atlanta. It’s just booming.

[01:00:48]

Eric Velasco: This is Denver?

[01:00:49]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah.

[01:00:52]

Eric Velasco: Did the partnership with Mr. Bodnar start with the second location, or how did that come about?

[01:00:58]

Nick Pihakis: It started with us moving our business from the 150 location to the 31 location. It’s just right around the corner.

[01:01:11]

Eric Velasco: Give us a little bit of background about Mr. Bodnar.

[01:01:13]

Nick Pihakis: All right. He and Wayne Lewis, those are our two partners, they came from the Wendy’s business. Mike’s from West Virginia and Wayne’s from Georgia, and they both worked at Shoney’s. Then the founder of Shoney’s son and Mike split off, and they opened up Wendy’s. And when they got to forty—I think it was forty Wendy’s, they sold them back to Wendy’s International, and then he and Wayne basically would get hired by Citicorp, which did all the financing for Wendy’s when a franchisee got in trouble, and they would go in and they

would fix it. And then Wendy’s International would then turn around and be able to put another franchisee in. So they had a really, really high-level reputation for how they ran businesses.

So when we got into partnership with them, our goal was to learn how to run multiple units instead of one. It’s much different. It’s a whole different animal when you’re not at the restaurant every day, because that’s what’s so hard about the restaurant business, is it’s the only business I’ve ever been where employees steal from you. It’s hard. So most owners that are independent owners are there all the time. They don’t really have a good quality of life. Their life *is* the restaurant business.

So Wayne and Mike were both very system-driven, and they taught us how you can run your business through the right information systems, and we’ve become pretty big in that area. We have our own IT department, we write our own programs, and it really drives quality and cost.

[01:03:30]

Eric Velasco: And consistency, I would think.

[01:03:32]

Nick Pihakis: And consistency, absolutely. So it ended up being, you know, corporate marries entrepreneur, and so it was the yin and yang and made a big difference.

[01:03:51]

Eric Velasco: How big a factor was that in the overall growth of Jim ‘N Nick’s?

[01:03:55]

Nick Pihakis: Huge. I mean, I would say it’s 50-50. Without their expertise and what they did, and without what I did with the food and the service, we would not be where we are.

[01:04:13]

Eric Velasco: It seems like you’ve had many professional growth opportunities along the way, from Rossi’s on up, watching how the business is done, different aspects, working the banquet, the franchising, the building this beyond one entrepreneur’s dream.

[01:04:32]

Nick Pihakis: Oh, yeah.

[01:04:33]

Eric Velasco: Now, is this Fresh Hospitality? Tell us about Fresh Hospitality, please.

[01:04:41]

Nick Pihakis: So a friend of mine, Keith Richards, that owned Taziki’s here in town, I knew him from back in the days when he worked for Frank at Bottega. [Interviewer’s note: Frank Stitt’s Bottega restaurant.]

He and his wife—he woke up one day. They had two sets of twins under five and three restaurants, and he was pulling his hair out. So we went in and put systems in place for him, helped with procedures on food, just getting everything tight, so he could grow the business or

we could grow the business together. But what was happening was people were saying—they were calling on the phone, they were going, “Jim ‘N Nick’s bought Taziki’s.” And we were very concerned about would that dilute what Taziki’s was. So we said, “We’ve got to separate this, and it’s got to be a standalone company if we’re going to do this, which is for us to go in and help young entrepreneurs grow their business,” which is what we do. So we developed the Fresh Hospitality company, which has different arms, and we interject what those different businesses need.

[01:06:08]

Eric Velasco: When did this start, and who’s the “we”?

[01:06:10]

Nick Pihakis: It started with Mike Bodnar and myself, Mike’s son, John Michael, and it started ten years ago. Our first project was Taziki’s, and then we have Martin’s Bar-B-Que, which we’re partners with. We’ve got a company called I Love Juice. We’ve got partners with Cochon Butcher, Donald Link and Steven [Stryjewski] out of New Orleans. We’ve got Octane Coffee. Big Bad Breakfasts we’re doing with John Currence. Biscuit Love is another breakfast place that’s up in Nashville. Vui’s Kitchen, which is a Vietnamese concept. Then we’ve got Saigon Noodle, which is a Vietnamese concept here in Birmingham. Grilled Cheeserie. So Biscuit Love and Grilled Cheeserie were both food trucks that wanted to get into a bricks-and-mortar building, and we helped Biscuit Love, Karl and Sarah [Worley], get into a bricks-and-mortar two years ago, and they’ve just crushed it. I mean, it’s just unbelievable. He was just in *Garden & Gun*.

[01:07:41]

Eric Velasco: Where are they located?

[01:07:42]

Nick Pihakis: They’re located in an area called the Gulch. It’s in Nashville, downtown Nashville. But Nashville’s just booming. I mean, it’s just incredible what’s going on there.

Big Bad Breakfast, we’re building three right now.

[01:08:03]

Eric Velasco: Where?

[01:08:03]

Nick Pihakis: One’s in Florida, one is in Florence, and a second one in Birmingham, in Homewood.

[01:08:13]

Eric Velasco: You talk about a variety of involvements. It sounds like some are partnerships, some are advice.

[01:08:22]

Nick Pihakis: All of them are partnerships. Some people need capital, and they all need systems, but some of them need capital more than they need direction. I mean, it’s hard to take a person like Donald Link and say, “This is how you should be cooking your food,” when he’s a genius at what he does. But if he wants to grow his business and doesn’t have the—you know, the way he does it is very organic and it’s very smart. He’s got Stephen as his partner in one restaurant, which Stephen’s a partner in all of them, but I’m just saying Stephen’s partner in one. He’s got Ryan Prewitt, that they opened up a seafood restaurant. But his three restaurants that he has are grown from individual chefs that came from him. That’s a very slow, methodical growth. Or you can put systems in place and take up a concept like [Cochon] Butcher, which is a sandwich/wine bar, great concept, and you put the right systems in place and you have the right training, you can open up as many of them as you want. So one’s a very slow growth. The other one is, you know, as fast as we can train people, we can open these.

[01:09:59]

Eric Velasco: In the case of John Currence, it also allows him to operate outside of his home base.

[01:10:04]

Nick Pihakis: Absolutely. And most those guys, I mean, you know, you either build your reputation as City Grocery, for instance, like John Currence is at City Grocery, or is it John Currence. And if it’s John Currence, then he’s trapped. If it’s City Grocery, then it’s the restaurant that John Currence started, and he can get outside of that and continue to develop chefs that can continue to grow in other aspects, and John can go out and do more things. But if

you get yourself into a trap of the brand becomes you, instead of the brand being a standalone brand that they know that the quality and everything goes along with your reputation is going to be behind it, then you can grow.

So, again, we have different arms. We’ve got administrative arms. We do all the accounting. We do all that in-house. We’ve got intellectual arms out of Fresh that we could come in and teach and train. We’ve got capital that we can inject to grow. So we’ve just got this “Here’s everything we do. What do you need?” And then we partner up with them, and we take them from one unit to as many as they want to do.

[01:11:28]

Eric Velasco: Is it based here?

[01:11:30]

Nick Pihakis: Here and Nashville. But, like I said, when we got in business with Keith, he had three. We’ve got sixty-seven Taziki’s now.

[01:11:41]

Eric Velasco: That’s quite phenomenal.

[01:11:43]

Nick Pihakis: Seven years, and we’ve got—our projection for this year is between twenty-five and thirty that will open.

[01:11:53]

Eric Velasco: Describe Taziki’s for people who are not familiar.

[01:11:57]

Nick Pihakis: It’s a Mediterranean concept with a southern twist. So you can go in there and get pimento cheese sandwich or you can get a gyro or you can get lamb. I mean, it’s fresh, healthy food. It’s sometimes confusing. When we go into a new market, people don’t really know what it is. If we called it Taziki’s Gyros Shop, people would know that’s what it is, but it’s more than that. They’ve got great salads. It’s a fast casual, so it’s not real expensive. But I think their philosophy and their reputation is based on fresh, healthy, high-quality food.

[01:12:44]

Eric Velasco: How did Little Donkey come about? n[Interviewer’s note: Little Donkey is a restaurant Pihakis and Fresh Hospitality opened in suburban Homewood.]

[01:12:51]

Nick Pihakis: I’ve researched it for about five years just traveling around, trying to learn that food, and a good friend of mine out in San Francisco that runs a nonprofit organization for Latino women, they cook in their home, they put the food in their trunk, and they go around to construction sites and they sell food, or they go to these farmers’ markets and set up tents. He built a professional kitchen, and they come in and they rent space in the kitchen and equipment on an hourly basis, so it’s a better environment for them to work in. He works with them and

helps develop them into understanding how to run a business from financial to organization, again, systems.

I would go out there and work and learn the different cultures and the food. That’s one of our concepts that we started from scratch. We were running a contest to see who could come up with a name. It was like five-thirty in the morning, and I was going through the Internet, and I was like, “I’ve got to get the name. I’ve got to get the name.” And I saw Little Donkey, and I was like, “What is Little Donkey?” And it’s burrito, is what it stands for. So I was like, “That’s it.” And I sent it out to everybody, and everybody laughed their ass off, and they were like, “That’s the best name we could come up with.”

So what we learned from our travels was how to cook and grind and make our own masa. In Mexico, the different states, the food varies so much, and we didn’t want to be pigeonholed into one specific way of cooking. So we’re pretty open. One of our best sellers is fried chicken, and we sell fried chicken like you would get fried chicken at a regular restaurant, except we put our spin on it, and it’s become so popular it’s incredible. So, you know, it’s not your typical Mexican restaurant, but it is a Mexican restaurant.

[01:15:29]

Eric Velasco: One of the things that just absolutely floors me when I look at Jim ‘N Nick’s are some of the numbers that go with it. We had a conversation about three years ago in which you said Jim ‘N Nick’s was selling about four million pounds of pork a year.

[01:15:46]

Nick Pihakis: It’s more now.

[01:15:48]

Eric Velasco: How much is it now?

[01:15:51]

Nick Pihakis: I don’t know. [*Laughs*] But it’s because we’ve grown. I mean, you know, we’re at thirty-seven units right now, so we’ve been very, very fortunate. But it’s a lot of pork.

[01:16:04]

Eric Velasco: That brings us to the Fatback Pig Project.

[01:16:09]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[01:16:10]

Eric Velasco: What is that and why’d you create it?

[01:16:13]

Nick Pihakis: I became friends with a guy by the name of Bill Niman, and Bill is sort of like the godfather of the slow, all-natural local movement. He started in California, still lives there. He was delivering beef and pork out of his pickup truck to local restaurants. He developed and was the founder of Niman Ranch. Anyway, he and I became friends, and we decided we wanted to do something in the South. It’s much less expensive to operate than California, land’s a lot cheaper, you know, everything is. It’s just less expensive.

So we felt like it was a good idea to try to find a way to bring back pork farming, or farming in general, because when the Bryan meat packing company closed in southern Mississippi, all the farmers basically went away, and what they do now is they raise the pigs indoors, and when they get to fifty pounds and they’re weaned, they ship them up north to Smithfield or wherever they’re going. They’re a lot less expensive to ship when they’re only fifty pounds. [Interviewer’s note: The processing plant in West Point, MS, closed in 2007.]

But that’s about the most we saw when we rode around Mississippi, Alabama, as far as farming. So, you know, there’s different elements that all have to connect, pieces of the puzzle, in order for that to work, which is you’ve got to have a farmer, you’ve got to have the pigs, you’ve got to have the feed, you’ve got to have a processing plant, distribution, and end user. Well, we knew we had the end user, which was us. So we had the safety net of if we could find the farmers, we knew that we could convince them to do it because we could show them our numbers, and all they wanted was a guarantee that they were going to get their money, because as it went or as it goes, what they got for their pigs is what the commodity market dictated. So at some point they were selling their pigs for less money than it was costing them to raise them. Some years, they were selling them and making a lot of money. So we were trying to bring stability.

So anyway, we started backing up, and we found a processing plant in Eva, Alabama, which is about fifty five miles north of Birmingham, that started off as an emu plant, and that went over like a sack of damn [unclear]. It just didn’t work out. [Laughs] So the state contributed \$850,000 to bring it back up to where it needed to be, and then Morgan County put in another \$325,000, and altogether we’ve got probably close to \$2 million invested in it.

[01:20:04]

Eric Velasco: When did the plant open?

[01:20:06]

Nick Pihakis: Five years ago.

[01:20:10]

Eric Velasco: What kind of pigs are you raising or are being raised, as far as where you’re getting your pigs from?

[01:20:16]

Nick Pihakis: Well, two things we discovered in the plant—and this is the first year that we actually broke even at the plant—was there’s not enough pigs, and it’s much more expensive for us to kill a pig and put it in a box, it’s \$60, where these large companies like Smithfield and Hormel and all those companies, they can do it for \$14.

[01:20:53]

Eric Velasco: Because of volume.

[01:20:55]

Nick Pihakis: Volume, technology, their equipment, how they do it. It’s just—and I’m talking about just the kill part. I’m not talking about raising the pig and all.

So we knew we couldn’t compete, and we knew that our guests would not pay \$2 more for a sandwich because it’s a special pig. So we were sort of caught in a place where we said we’ve been buying our products from a family here in town for thirty years, we know it’s high quality, we know everything that’s going on with it, but how do we develop farms to the point where they can sell us enough pigs at the right price that we could compete? And it’s a real fine balance in—where we found where we make the most money is in value-added products like bacon and sausage. So we started down that path, and we’ve got, I think, five or six farmers now, seven farmers, that are raising Duroc, Berkshire. They all have their favorite breed that they like to raise, but as long as they’re raising them right, we’re okay with it.

[01:22:30]

Eric Velasco: Which is?

[01:22:31]

Nick Pihakis: They raise them outdoor. And you get the right breed, you get a higher yield on their birth rate. It all works out. But we first started off with Mangalitsa and that was a woolly pig, and Birmingham’s too hot for them. And so, you know, the birth rate was like four or five pigs, and you’ve got to get at least ten out of a litter. The Berkshire, Duroc, they’re good moms. Typically, you lose 10 percent, and so if they have twelve and we lose 10 percent, we get ten in round numbers.

So, you know, our main thing is developing brands, so we’ve got Fatback Bacon; we’ve got Fatback Sausage; we’ve got Fatback Smoked Sausage; we have Big Bad Breakfast products; we’ve got Cochon Butcher products. So developing those brands and continuing to train and

develop these unskilled people, how to use a knife, how to butcher, it’s been a long process and it’s cost us a lot of money, but we’re finally to a point where, again, we broke even this year, and this year we’re going to make money because of the value-added products.

[01:24:20]

Eric Velasco: About how much are you processing this year, or 2016, say?

[01:24:28]

Nick Pihakis: I can tell you this, we do all of Jim ‘N Nick’s sausage, and it’s 90,000 pounds a year just for Jim ‘N Nick’s sausage. Right now we’re doing Jim ‘N Nick’s sausage, bacon, bacon ends, the bacon end pieces. We do only our whole hogs for events that we do. We do Martin’s hogs, whole hogs that he cooks every day. We’re killing probably fifty pigs a week right now.

When we first started the plant, we were buying hogs from one of the farmers that sold to Barbers, but we didn’t like the fact that they were raised indoors. So we went down to visit him, and, I mean, we were in the country, like you could hear banjos playing. And he said, “Y’all go in that room there and take off all your clothes and put those jumpsuits on.” And there was three of us, and we got in this little shed and I looked at them, and I was like, “I’m not taking all my clothes off and there’s nobody around that can hear me scream.” [*Laughs*]

But the reason why he told us to do that, he goes, “You’re going to regret it if you don’t.” The smell in that place was so bad. I mean, it was like an ammonia kind of smell, that when we got out and took the jumpsuits off and we got in the car, we literally had to keep the windows rolled down all the way back, it smelled so bad.

We started buying pigs from him in hopes that we could get him to let him continue to raise pigs that he was selling up north indoors, but start the process of doing pigs outside, because he had the infrastructure to ramp up. So we started processing. It was 325 pigs a week to supply Jim ‘N Nick’s, so they had to do it in two loads. And he wouldn’t make that transition, and so we just said, “We’re not going to support him if he’s not going to come around.” So that’s how we ended up going, “Okay, we’re going to start over, and we’re going to go out and we’re going to do this right.” And it’s just taken—it’s probably going to take us another five years.

[01:27:15]

Eric Velasco: You said seven farms?

[01:27:17]

Nick Pihakis: Right now.

[01:27:20]

Eric Velasco: All in Alabama or different states?

[01:27:21]

Nick Pihakis: In Alabama.

[01:27:25]

Eric Velasco: I guess part of the reason for that is proximity to the plant?

[01:27:29]

Nick Pihakis: You can go 300 miles. You can go 300 miles, and you can’t keep the hogs at the facility for more than twenty-four hours without feeding them. So we’re very attentive to the quality of those hogs when they’re—at least the last part of their life, that they’re treated the right way.

[01:27:55]

Eric Velasco: What products are you making for Big Bad Breakfast?

[01:27:58]

Nick Pihakis: We make their sausage, we make their andouille. Let’s see. We do seven products for Cochon Butcher and we do four for Big Bad Breakfast. I can’t remember what they are.

[01:28:21]

Eric Velasco: What are some of the ones for Cochon?

[01:28:24]

Nick Pihakis: We do Buckboard bacon. We do their andouille sausage. We do their tasso. We do their—I’m drawing a blank. I can’t remember.

[01:28:49]

Eric Velasco: You mentioned Martin’s cooks whole hog.

[01:28:51]

Nick Pihakis: Mm-hmm.

[01:28:52]

Eric Velasco: What about Jim ‘N Nick’s?

[01:28:53]

Nick Pihakis: We do for events.

[01:28:57]

Eric Velasco: Which are?

[01:28:59]

Nick Pihakis: We go out to California every year and we do two festivals out there. We do Big Apple Barbecue. We do a lot of catering, and we’ll have requests for our hogs for the catering events. Our big theory for what we do in the community is health and wellness, teachers and preachers. So we do all the races. We do the Cooper City Bridge Run, or Cooper Bridge Run, in Charleston. We do Seaside Half Marathon. We do the race that’s this weekend here, the Mercedes Marathon. We do all the post-race food for all those kind of—out in Denver they’ve got a marathon out there that we do. And then we do a lot of stuff for schools for fundraisers, churches. Kids are real important to what we—you know, everybody’s got their hand out, they need something, you know, and most these organizations that deal with kids, they go to the mom and dad, which are very sensitive about making sure that their kids are well taken care of. So it’s

kind of hard if you don’t draw the line in the sand to say no, so we don’t ever want to say no. So we figured if we picked the right things to put our money towards, then it’s why we’ve got “Community” in our name. I mean, we put it in there for a reason.

[01:30:53]

Eric Velasco: And it goes beyond just those kinds of events. You’re very involved in Jones Valley Teaching Farm?

[01:31:01]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[01:31:04]

Eric Velasco: Tell us what that is and what they’re doing.

[01:31:06]

Nick Pihakis: Okay. It is a nonprofit organization that started in 2002, and we started it in a little vacant lot and now we’re doing about 20,000 pounds of produce a year. [Interviewer’s note: Jones Valley Teaching Farm is in downtown Birmingham.]

We’ve got a program called Good School Food, which they either have a farm lab or an actual farm on their property. It’s K through eighth, and we just expanded it to nine through

twelve. We’re in seven schools, the curriculum in seven schools, and our big thing is to teach kids where their food comes from.

We do a fundraiser every year to get the parents involved. There’s a big gap between a kid that’s in the fifth or sixth grade that goes home and says, “I had the best tomato I’ve ever eaten in my life,” and the mom goes to the grocery store and she can buy regular tomatoes for a dollar a pound, and the good tomatoes are five dollars a pound. To make that choice, it’s pretty tough for a lot of people, so we’re trying to educate them on why that’s important, because the more they buy, obviously, the farmers can reduce their price, and it becomes more balanced. So it’s a good program. I actually have some information here.

One of the things we did was we opened up farmers’ markets at the schools, to teach these kids how to sell and do business, and that was pretty impactful.

[01:33:26]

Eric Velasco: Is that similar to what Indian Springs is doing with their program, on a smaller scale?

[01:33:33]

Nick Pihakis: You know, we did that garden out at Indian Springs, and it didn’t do as well as we wanted it to do. It’s there, and the most interested the kids have gotten in this, when we put chickens out there, because then they had something to chase around. But those kids were older, you know, so we found that their attention—you know. Now all of a sudden, you know, the girls and the guys were more important than where their food came from. But it was really cool when we first started because we just had a little small space in their cafeteria that we put food from

the garden, and that space grew and grew as time went on because kids were eating more and more of the food that we were getting out of it. But it’s a real hard process to get into people’s mind, you know, why it’s important.

[01:34:44]

Eric Velasco: That’s why you like to hit them young over at Jones Valley.

[01:34:46]

Nick Pihakis: Yes.

[01:34:48]

Eric Velasco: What is your involvement with Jones Valley? What’s your role there?

[01:34:51]

Nick Pihakis: I’m a board member, and I can proudly say that I’ve helped them with their fundraisers, and we started off with the fundraiser that we did, \$12,000 we raised the first year, and this year we raised \$550,000.

[01:35:14]

Eric Velasco: Wow!

[01:35:16]

Nick Pihakis: And it’s one dinner and all the Fatback Collective come and cook. Different ones come at different times, but there’s typically seven or eight of us that are there that support and cook different dishes. So we’ve done everything from a whole cow, which was incredible, to seven—I did this. Last year, we did seven fires, so we had seven different cooking apparatuses that were all driven by wood and coals, and we cooked seven different species, which was pretty incredible.

[01:36:02]

Eric Velasco: What is the Fatback Collective?

[01:36:08]

Nick Pihakis: It’s a group of chefs and foodies and food writers that we started off, Donald Link and I wanted to do Memphis in May, and we didn’t want to call it Jim ‘N Nick’s or Cochon Butcher or whatever, because the Memphis in May judges, we were told, frown on big businesses. They want independents. So we came up with the name Fatback Collective. Actually, flying down to New Orleans to meet Donald was John T. Edge, myself, and Drew Robinson. I think it was Drew and John T. that said it, and so we said, “That’s it. That’s the name.”

And that’s the trophy (points to huge trophy in the conference room) that we placed third, first time ever a first-time entry team has ever placed, and that was for whole hog, which is the hardest division to place in. What we were trying to prove is you didn’t have to use charcoal and you didn’t have to pump your pork with a bunch of different stuff, you know, and that was the

Mangalitsa we cooked, so it was all natural. We burned wood, we made our own coals. We stayed up all night and cooked it, and we came in third.

[01:38:00]

Eric Velasco: Who all was on the team?

[01:38:01]

Nick Pihakis: Oh, god. It was Sean Brock, John Currence, Donald, myself, my son Nicholas, Ron Prewitt, Stephen [Stryjewski], John T., John T’s son, Rob McDaniel, Pat Martin. It was a bunch of us. It was a lot of fun.

[01:38:30]

Eric Velasco: It must have been intimidating for some of the competition, if they recognized any of you.

[01:38:34]

Nick Pihakis: I think it was real intimidating. [*Laughs*] I think it was. But we drank a lot of whiskey and beer and bonded and had a good time.

From there, we tried to determine who we were and why we did what we did, and we came to the conclusion that we are a group of people that come together to learn from each other,

to learn from other people in our industry or in other industries, and to help people. We’ve had three barbecue restaurants burn, and we’ve rebuilt.

[01:39:15]

Eric Velasco: Physically rebuilt?

[01:39:18]

Nick Pihakis: One we physically did. When Rodney Scott—he was one of the members, or is one of the members of Fatback—when his pit house burned, we did what we called Rodney Scott in Exile, and he went from city to city to one of the Fatback Collective’s restaurants and cooked, and we charged whatever, and he cooked whole hog, and that’s what he’s known for. And we sold tickets and we raised \$80,000 to rebuild his pit room.

But we’ve traveled to Uruguay. We’ve gone to Belize. We’re trying to plan a trip right now to go to Cuba. When we went to Uruguay, that was a big inspiration for Donald’s and Ron and Stephen’s restaurant, Pêche, which is the seafood restaurant, and how they cook their fish. So it’s been good. We’ve shared a lot of ideas. When you get together with that kind of talent and knowledge, you can’t help but learn from it, so I can pick up the phone and call anybody in that group and say, “Hey, I’m doing something. I need help with this,” and they’re there. So it’s been real good for us.

The credit goes to the Southern Foodways Alliance, because that’s where we all met, and without John T. and the leadership and direction that Southern Foodways has given us all, we wouldn’t be together.

[01:41:08]

Eric Velasco: When was that Memphis in May?

[01:41:10]

Nick Pihakis: When?

[01:41:11]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[01:41:14]

Nick Pihakis: 2011.

[01:41:17]

Eric Velasco: Have you competed since then?

[01:41:19]

Nick Pihakis: We did one more the next year, and we realized that we’d run our course.

[Laughs] We realized that wasn’t for us, and it’s not. I mean, that’s not what we do. It was fun to see if we could do it, and we did it. It brought us all closer together.

[01:41:41]

Eric Velasco: But these learning missions, like Uruguay, Belize, sound more like what you’re about now.

[01:41:48]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah, and the lady that orchestrated those trips for us, it’s called agritourism, and she works for a company. She’s actually the CEO of a company called Belcampo, and so they own 10,000 acres in Uruguay and 20,000 in Belize, and they own 10,000 more acres up in Shasta, California.

They help put the trips together, because they wanted to see what the chefs felt going to their farms and was it something that they should pursue from the standpoint of bringing people to these farms and seeing—I mean, we learned how to make different chocolate. We went snorkeling for lobster. We cooked with the chefs down in Uruguay that were incredible. So one night they cooked for us, and then the next night we cooked for them. A lot of them came from a group out of Francis Mallmann’s restaurants down there, so they really know how to cook their food. It was a good learning experience for all of us.

[01:43:18]

Eric Velasco: There’s something that’s special that happens when people with like backgrounds and like interests get together.

[01:43:25]

Nick Pihakis: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it’s a lot of camaraderie, and, again, you’ve got to be careful about it, because you can become an elitist, and all of a sudden, people think, “Those guys think they’re the best thing in the world.” So we’re always bringing more people into the group, and there’s people that we’ve had in the group that don’t participate but they’re still part of it, and

then we let new people come in and participate just to keep it from being a closed organization. It’s just not what it’s about.

[01:44:09]

Eric Velasco: Are there periodic gatherings?

[01:44:11]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah. Like we’ll get together in March for the Charleston Wine + Food, that we do a dinner every year at Nick’s Bar-B-Q on King’s Street, that we honor a different pitmaster every year. So we’ve gone as far as Texas, a guy came from Texas last year, Beaumont. We’ve had Helen from Tennessee. [Interviewer’s note: Helen Turner, of Helen’s Bar-B-Q in Brownsville, TN.]

Rodney Scott was the first one. Sam Jones was the second pitmaster. The guys from Tuscaloosa came and cooked with us. So we honor a different pitmaster.

Then some of the chefs from Fatback will make dishes around whatever they’re cooking. Like this year, Donald and Rob are doing the appetizers, and Drew will do something to go along with it so it complements the dinner. The dinner, I think they charge \$150, and the money goes to a charity. It’s a whole weekend in Charleston, and we’re just one of *many* events that happen. But, again, it’s a partnership with us and the Southern Foodways Alliance.

[01:45:35]

Eric Velasco: Got to be a lot of fun.

[01:45:36]

Nick Pihakis: It’s hilarious.

[01:45:49]

Eric Velasco: A lot of the old-time Greek restaurateurs here had an identity, a very Greek identity. How do you view yourself, Greek, American, Alabamian, southern, Birminghamian? How do you view yourself?

[01:46:12]

Nick Pihakis: I don’t think there’s as much emphasis on Greek or not Greek. I think there’s more emphasis on what you do. I’ve been asked by my partner, which he gives me shit all the time, is, “Do you want to be rich or famous?” And my response to him is, “I want to be influential.” And I would hope that people would view what we’ve accomplished and are still trying to accomplish is how influential can we be on the communities that we’re involved in, and that’s not just Birmingham. Whether it’s in Denver or South Carolina or wherever, I just want people to say, “Those guys, they do the right thing.”

[01:47:16]

Eric Velasco: And we’re not just talking culinary influence. What other influences do you want to have?

[01:47:20]

Nick Pihakis: I think it’s a big part of it, and I’m a big, big fan of this generational thing, is learning the millennials, what makes them tick. I had a mother of one of our employees call me up one day and she goes, “What do you do to train your employees?”

And I was like, “What do you mean? Did we do something wrong?”

She goes, “I’ve been trying to get my son to say ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘No, sir,’ and ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and ‘No, ma’am,’ and ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ for years. And now all of a sudden, he comes home and he’s saying it. What did you do?”

You know, our goal, it’s not necessarily to mechanically get them to have better manners or have respect for each other or for our customers or whatever; it’s teaching them to be a better person. Like I say, I go back to the Southern Foodways Alliance. One of the things it did for me in getting involved with that organization was teaching me what’s important. What is important? Nice cars, fancy clothes, or whatever you want, materialistic? Or is it transferring the right message to the next generation? I think that’s important.

[01:48:59]

Eric Velasco: How do you think you’re doing in that endeavor?

[01:49:02]

Nick Pihakis: How am I doing in it?

[01:49:05]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[01:49:08]

Nick Pihakis: Well, I think that, you know, my kids, they don’t do drugs, they have fun. I figured this out because I’m going to take all the credit for it, but I started this thing about ten years ago where I said to my kids, “We’re going to have family night once a week. I don’t care who you bring. You can bring your girlfriend, your best friend, nobody, but I want you to come to our house and we’re going to eat dinner together.”

And after two or three years, they started calling me, going, “Are we going to have family night?” And what I figured out was they were just getting a free meal. [*Laughs*]

So was it influential for that to be important to them? Yes, very. They’re very close. Two of my children are married. They’re closer to their in-laws that they would have been, because they learned that. It was something that could be taught, that it’s important to show respect.

The best thing I ever did for Nicholas was to get him to be a member of Fatback Collective, because now he has his own relationship with the Donald Links and the John T. Edge. He’ll be going out of town and he’ll call them up or text them and say, “Can you get me in your restaurant?”

I’m like, “Nicholas, you shouldn’t be using—,” you know, but he does it because he’s that comfortable with them, and he shows them that much respect. So they show it back. So I think measuring from just my children, I think that I’m getting there.

[01:51:00]

Eric Velasco: I’m taking it from earlier in our conversation, you growing up and you as an adult don’t get to Greece very often.

[01:51:07]

Nick Pihakis: No. I never travel, and then when we started opening up restaurants in other states, I was putting about anywhere from 45 to 60,000 miles on my car a year. I know. So I never went anywhere. So then I started saying, “We’re going to do a family trip every year,” and we have. Last year, we went to Italy, and the year before, we went to France and to England. Hopefully—my daughter’s getting married—my youngest is getting married in November, and so I’m hoping that once all that passes, that we can then take a family trip to Greece.

[01:52:06]

Eric Velasco: Were you able to get home for dinner very often?

[01:52:08]

Nick Pihakis: No.

[01:52:10]

Eric Velasco: Was that part of the motivation for starting family night?

[01:52:13]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah. I knew early on that I was going to sacrifice a lot of quality time with my kids, but I would catch up when we got older, or when they got older. And we’re very close now, and you can’t replace time, obviously, but I’ve made up the time that I—I feel like I’ve made up the time that I lost with them, because I’m very conscientious about it. But do I want be able to spend time with my daughter, with my grandchild, or do I want to go see her as a seven-

year-old trying to throw a basketball in a basketball hoop, that she won’t even remember that I was there or not there? It’s more important to me to have frontloaded the hard work that I had to put in to be able to spend that quality time now.

But, yeah, yeah, I was never home. I mean, it was just part of—that’s what I’m saying about the restaurant industry, is it’s a tough industry to work in because you’re working when other people aren’t, whether it’s nights or weekends or holidays. When everybody else is winding down for Christmas, we’re winding up, because everybody’s out shopping. You’re trying to get the business when it’s there. So, yeah, I think it’s just the opposite of what I think this generation wants. That’s going to be the tough part.

All these new labor laws they’re putting in, that was a big part of the immigration situation is, is that the illegal immigrants that were coming over, they want to work, and it was hard to find people, the younger group that wanted to work that kind of hours and that hard, where those guys didn’t care.

But that time will pass, as we all know, and you’ve got to evolve. Like Jim ‘N Nick’s has got to evolve, all of our other restaurants have to evolve, our country’s got to evolve to be able to make it more appealing and understand what they want. At the top of their list is not how much money they make. My dad’s generation, if you asked him, his response was, “I *have* to work.” You don’t hear that a lot now, you know. It’s just not said. So what is going to happen with the workforce today, and what’s going to happen with our industry, and is it going to be any different? Is my son going to sacrifice time away from home with his children like I did? No, he’s not going to do that.

[01:55:38]

Eric Velasco: And sometimes it’s the reaction to that, sometimes it’s just changing times.

[01:55:43]

Nick Pihakis: I think it’s changing times, but it’s also that as a parent, I want him to have a better platform to jump off of than I did, just like my dad wanted me to have a better platform to jump off than he did.

[01:55:57]

Eric Velasco: Did you go to college?

[01:55:58]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah.

[01:55:59]

Eric Velasco: Graduate?

[01:56:00]

Nick Pihakis: Nope. I went to UAB, and I came to the realization I already knew what I wanted to do, and I had to pick my battles, and I wanted to put more time into learning what I’m doing today than what I was learning in school. I hated school with a passion. *[Laughs]*

[01:56:25]

Eric Velasco: College is about getting you ready for what you’re going to do in adulthood anyway.

[01:56:28]

Nick Pihakis: Well, it is, if you use it that way.

[01:56:31]

Eric Velasco: You went to a different university, Rossi U. [*Laughs*]

[01:56:36]

Nick Pihakis: Yeah. Fortunately, all three of my kids went to college, graduated. My oldest daughter went to college, and her major was wildlife management. She went to Auburn. And I asked her one day, I said, “What do you think you’re going to do with that?” And we sort of laughed about it, and I said, “I think you misunderstood what that was. I think you were thinking they were teaching you how to manage yourself, not work in some national park.” [*Laughs*] I mean, so, you know, what is she going to do with wildlife management, you know?

My other daughter wanted to be a teacher, and she’s not. She works for us. My son got a scholarship to Birmingham Southern to play soccer, played five years, or four years, and he’s probably the one that uses the most out of—because he studied business and all that, and he probably uses his what he learned the most. I’m not downplaying college, I think it’s great, but it just wasn’t for me.

[01:57:48]

Eric Velasco: Did you anticipate or want or push your children to go into the business?

[01:57:55]

Nick Pihakis: You know, I selfishly—my youngest, because of Indian Springs, they really push them to go to these small colleges, so she started in Boston and came all the way down. She milked that as much as she could, and she ended up going to the College of Charleston for one semester, and then she ended up going to University of Alabama. But I encouraged them all to stay close, because what I didn’t want them to do was go off to college somewhere and meet somebody and then end up living out of the state, so I was real selfish about keeping them close. And the same way with our business. I’m like, “Why would you want to go work with somebody else? It’s crazy. You’re going to let somebody else tell you what to do? And you’ve got to follow their rules. We make our own rules. It’s better that way.” *[Laughs]*

[01:58:54]

Eric Velasco: You’re not making rules for them as their boss?

[01:58:57]

Nick Pihakis: No. No, they all have really good work ethics, and they care. You can’t get anybody to care more about our business than your own family. So there’s a lot of things that don’t have to be taught or ingrained into them, that they bring to the table already.

[01:59:18]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing? What do we need to add here?

[01:59:21]

Nick Pihakis: I don't know.

[01:59:25]

Eric Velasco: Well, I do appreciate you taking the time with us. It's a great story, and I look forward to talking with you more in the future.

[01:59:35]

Nick Pihakis: Good.

[01:59:36]

Eric Velasco: Thank you very much. We're going to have that thirty seconds of silence now.

[01:59:39]

Nick Pihakis: Do we stare at each other? [*Laughs*]

[01:59:41]

Eric Velasco: Stare at each other.

[*END OF INTERVIEW*]