



David Ragoonath
Soul Central
Charlotte, North Carolina

Location: Soul Central Charlotte, North Carolina
Interviewer: Joseph Ewoodzie
Transcription: Trint
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Project: Charlotte's Central Avenue Corridor

[INTERVIEW STARTS AT 00:00:04]

Joseph Ewoodzie: So you were at, what's the name of the other place you were at?

[00:00:06]

David Ragoonath: So when we—when I first moved to Charlotte, I opened a barbecue restaurant. It was called Hog Heaven.

[00:00:23]

Joseph Ewoodzie: Hog Heaven.

[00:00:24]

David Ragoonath: Hog Heaven. So, opened the doors. The owner stayed there and worked with us and taught me. I had no idea what barbecue in the South was all about.

[00:00:26]

Joseph Ewoodzie: Really?

[00:00:26]

David Ragoonath: Yeah. Because coming from New York or even from the island, Trinidad, when we do barbecue it's eat a brisket or chicken. You know? And when I got here I realized barbecue is religion down here, you know? Pork. So anyway, the owner, you know, he taught me everything I need to know about pulled pork, Lexington-style barbecue, so I learned that and everything. And he stayed on with me for two months and taught me everything. And customers come in, and they saw me, you know, this is after a few months. And they were like, "Where's the other guy?" So I got into the story of he sold it, you know, and I'm the new owner. He's like, "Well all right, you know, I'll try it." So they were willing to try it. So they tried it and sat there, and he was like, "Oh it's the name

same."

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:01:29] Really?

David Ragoonath: [00:01:29] Not knowing that the owner, he was in the back still, he was still helping me make the stuff, you know?

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:01:29] So the food was exactly the same.

David Ragoonath: [00:01:35] He cooked it. I was just the new owner. So, you know, when they say it wasn't the same when he came outside and he told them, "What are you talking about? I made it. He just owns the place now." You know, they were shocked but it raised my eyebrows like, man I'm in the wrong business. They was like, "You don't eat it, why you selling it.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:01:53] So why do you think they said it wasn't the same? What do you think was like, their thought process?

David Ragoonath: [00:02:02] No, I don't think it has anything to do with the food. It's just me being [*Inaudible*] selling pork, raised their curiosity, like he might be from the Middle East or something. They don't eat pork over there, why is he selling? So right there, you know, they think it's not the same. You know, but I'm from the island of Trinidad and Tobago and there we eat anything that moves. [*Laughs*]

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:02:25] [*Laughs*] That's amazing. It says a lot about who gets to present what food.

David Ragoonath: [00:02:35] Right. So, you know. So I held onto it to for two years, and I realize, you know, it was a destination. If somebody wants pork they come to me. But it doesn't pay the bills. So we sold it. One of the customers that used to come in there, he owned the—the soul food restaurant called Lola's. So he heard what's going on. He was like, "Man, come work with me." You know, now this is a white guy from Kentucky. Who owned the soul food restaurant, Lola's. And he said, "Come work with me," and I said, "All right. No problem." So I got into it with him. At that time he had a black lady cooking for him by the name of Miss Dot. She did all the cooking then, so I was just helping and whatever she needed I'll get done. And little by little I kind of pick up on what she's doing and all of that. She never says, "Okay, this is what you do. This is how much you put,"—she never said that to me.

David Ragoonath: [00:03:41] She just did what she do, and I just [*inaudible*] you know? And when she decided you know, when she had enough because she had a bad knee and a bad back, and it was time to resign, she was like, "Okay, I will show you a few things now, yeah?" But she never measures everything. Everything was a pinch of this and pinch of that—

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:03:58] And you just had to pay attention?

David Ragoonath: [00:04:01] Right. You just have to pay attention. You know, so—now what she was doing, I knew about that because that's how I learned to cook coming from the islands. On the island nobody measures anything. Everybody was just—your mom or your grandmom just pinch and throw in, you know. So that's how I knew. So when she was doing that I was just, you know, following along. But. So finally I got into doing it. Cooking the food and stuff myself. And, you know, she was surprised, like it tasted really good. And in those days she put should put a lot of back fat in the food. You know, pork and stuff. When I started, when she finally resigned and I started doing it, I stopped putting pork in anything. I just started cooking with a lot more seasoning.

You know, and that's where all the flavors come from. Instead of using all the fat—because people, you know, talk about watching all the fat—they want to eat—some people don't eat pork, so they want to know the veggies. I mean, up to now people come up and still ask if you have pork in the veggies, you know. So then we got away from that.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:05:13] So, kinda take me back to the beginning of all of this. How did food and cooking become your thing?

David Ragoonath: [00:05:22] [Laughs] I don't know, man. You know, growing up in the islands, when the guys on the weekend, we'd go to the beach. All the guys get around and we all chip in and we'd do something to cook. We call it a—here they say cook out, we just call it—you okay?

[*Talking to one of his employees*] Here they say a cookout, there we say a lime. We going for a lime. When you hear a lime that means we're going to cook, eat, drink.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:05:51] A lime. Like, L-I-M-E. Okay, wow. [*Laughs*] I've never heard of—

David Ragoonath: [00:05:55] You're liming, you know? Instead of hanging out, liming.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:05:59] Yeah, I've never heard that.

David Ragoonath: [00:05:59] When they say, "Okay, we going on the beach, we're going for a lime," that means that your pots, your pans, your food ready. We go, so. That's where my cooking experience come from, but I never used to do a lot of cooking. I always help. When I moved to New York City in 1989, I worked for a guy also from the country I'm from, Trinidad. He had a store, but I didn't do no cooking there. They had a chef did all the cooking. And again, I just watch what's going on. I learned by just watching. You know, and even hands on. So he got to realize, you know,

how serious I was and how I did things. Because when I started working with him, I started at seven in the night to seven in the morning. So in the mornings when the morning shift comes in, everything was ready to go. And they were like, "Wow." They never had that before, you know?

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:07:02] You did all of it.

David Ragoonath: [00:07:04] So yeah. Me and the other guy, you know, we'd get it ready. And he saw that, the manager saw it and he mentioned it to the owner and the owner was like, "Okay. I'm opening a new store. I want you to come in and be the manager in the store." So, okay. So he opened the store. I managed the store. Again, I'm still not doing any cooking. You know, I'm watching. But I'm not cooking.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:07:30] So what is your role?

David Ragoonath: [00:07:31] My role was the manager.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:07:33] Oh, okay.

David Ragoonath: [00:07:33] But, as a manager you need to know everything about the food. So if somebody calls, you need to answer a question. So I always go in the back, question the chef, or even watch what the chef's doing. Take mental notes, you know? In 2004, a friend of mine moved to Charlotte, who used to live in New York with me. And he was like, "Man, you've got to come to Charlotte and see what's going on, it's blowing up. Things are really nice down there. And I know you like the food business. There's a barbecue restaurant we're gonna buy. And that's how I got—

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:08:09] Ah, and that's how you started with the barbecue restaurant.

David Ragoonath: [00:08:10] That's how I got—yes.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:08:12] How did you—why come to the U.S. in the first place? I think for all of us in the—from the immigrant places, right, everybody has their "here's why I came to the U.S." What was the? Was your family here? How did you—why did you come here?

David Ragoonath: [00:08:26] I had an aunt in New York. But the reason I came to the United States was, a friend of mine had just bought a brand new car. And we went to a bar to christen it, you know, have a drink and—and we walked in the bar and the bar was being held up at gunpoint.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:08:45] No way.

David Ragoonath: [00:08:46] Yeah. And I lost everything. I used to wear a lot of jewelry and stuff, I lost my money and everything, but that didn't matter. What mattered was I knew the guy who doing the robbing. The robbery. You know, I went to school with him. But I didn't saw anything, you know, because I didn't want anybody to know I know him. So, after the robbery and stuff, and everybody got back to normal, they went to rob another place, and they were held by the police. The police caught them. So when they figured out they just robbed here, and they just robbed there, they had to get some eyewitnesses. So we were part of the eyewitness of the line-up. In the Islands in the line-up, there's no mirror.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:09:36] *[Laughs]*

David Ragoonath: [00:09:36] You're face-to-face. No one-way mirror. So, when they asked who it is, you know, right away I knew who it was, so I say, "That's the guy." But no number or anything,

"That's the guy." I touched him on his shoulder, I said, "Hey, Slick," and you know he looked at me. So, that was his name, Slick. So right away, I was like, "Man, I shouldn't have done that." But it was too late, the police officer say he could hold you for assault because I touched him.

David Ragoonath: [00:10:10] So, the case went on for a while and then the day of the sentencing, you know, we were all in court. They call your name, where you live, where you work. And his family and he's standing right there. You know, there was like two votes to go again before they could really send him away, you know? And at that point I told myself, I was like, "I gotta get out of here." So I went home and told my mom and dad what's going on, you know. And they said, Well, if you want to apply for the visa." So I went and applied for the visa and they turned me down. So now, I had to go into, like, hiding, you know? Change jobs and everything. Move out from my parents. There's a bowling alley, the one and only bowling alley in Trinidad. I started bowling there for a long time. And there was a tournament coming up. The winner of the tournament gets to come to the United States.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:11:08] Wow! No way.

David Ragoonath: [00:11:08] Yeah. [*Cell phone rings*] So, I did my best. And I won. Excuse me one second [*pauses interview to answer his cell phone*].

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:11:18] Yeah, take your time.

David Ragoonath: [00:11:29] [*Answer cell phone. Recording pauses.*]

[00:11:45] [*Interview resumes*]

David Ragoonath: [00:11:46] He goes to UNCC [University of North Carolina at Charlotte]—

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:11:46] Like physical therapy, exercise science. Stuff that like? Oh that's great. He'll never be out of a job with that.

David Ragoonath: [00:11:55] But the science part, he don't like.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:11:58] Yeah. Science is hard.

David Ragoonath: [00:11:58] That's what he said. That's why I just ask him how the test goes. Yesterday he had one, and he say he don't think he did too well.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:12:02] It's one of those things the more you run it. My best friend from college is Jamaican. And he was an exercise science major, ended up being a dentist. But I remember him studying for those sciences. *[Laughs]*

David Ragoonath: [00:12:21] Anyway so back to this now.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:12:23] So you were—you could bowl. So that's your—you're good.

David Ragoonath: [00:12:25] Yeah. So that's my hobby, yeah.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:12:29] Wow. Do you still bowl?

David Ragoonath: [00:12:36] Yeah.

Unidentified Speaker (Woman): [00:12:37] Both?

David Ragoonath: [00:12:42] Yeah, I still bowl.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:12:43] Wow.

David Ragoonath: [00:12:43] Yeah. I average 217.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:12:43] Wow. That's like, mostly strikes.

David Ragoonath: [00:12:47] Yeah. So anyway. So I won that tournament, and I got a letter from the sports organization to go to the U.S. Embassy to get a visa so I can go and do the bowling. And, so I did the bowling and I went back. And went—this thing was going on here with the guy. You know, again I told my parents, "I have the visa so I'm just going go," you know. So I came to the U.S. on that visa. And just never returned.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:13:15] Wow. Wow. To this day never been back?

David Ragoonath: [00:13:21] Oh yeah, I go back. Now I became a naturalized citizen.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:13:26] What did you what were you doing before you left?

David Ragoonath: [00:13:29] At home? It was pretty much like a family business. In the Caribbean it's very hot. So my dad had an ice factory.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:13:36] Wow. Yeah.

David Ragoonath: [00:13:41] So we made ice and sell ice.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:13:42] Yeah, I remember that too.

David Ragoonath: [00:13:44] [*Inaudible*] water. [*Laughs*]

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:13:48] Yeah. [*Laughs*]

David Ragoonath: [00:13:51] Yeah, so that was—we all worked there, but when this happened I kind of disappeared.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:13:51] So back home the food thing was not part of your radar. The most cooking you did was liming?

David Ragoonath: [00:13:58] Yeah. That's it.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:02] And, so no other training. What did you—I mean, how did your folks back home react when you tell them that you own a restaurant here?

David Ragoonath: [00:14:09] They're very happy. They're very happy, yeah. I went home three weeks ago. And the first thing that everybody was like, "When are you going to cook?" [*Laughs*]
Like, "I'm on vacation. I don't know about cooking.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:25] Wow.

David Ragoonath: [00:14:25] So again, when I moved to Charlotte, I still wasn't cooking until we got that barbecue restaurant.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:31] Wow. Tell me, how old were you when you moved to U.S.?

David Ragoonath: [00:14:35] To the U.S.?

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:35] Yeah.

David Ragoonath: [00:14:36] Nineteen.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:37] Wow. So it's been a while.

David Ragoonath: [00:14:39] It's been a while.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:39] Nineteen. And then you move to New York City?

David Ragoonath: [00:14:42] New York, yes. And, actually today is my birthday.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:42] No! [*Laughs*]

David Ragoonath: [00:14:49] Yeah, I just turned fifty-one today.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:49] Wow! [*Shouts a loud*] Do we got a birthday cake for this man?

Unidentified Speaker (Woman): [00:14:55] Sunday.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:14:56] Sunday. I've got to come back on Sunday?

Unidentified Speaker (Woman): [00:15:03] No, not yet.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:15:04] *[Laughs]*

Unidentified Speaker (Woman): [00:15:04] But you see, you spilled the beans now.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:15:06] Wow, happy birthday, man!

David Ragoonath: [00:15:14] Yeah, so came here, again, only started cooking for a food establishment in Charlotte. At the barbecue restaurant.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:15:22] What were the different kinds of barbecues?

David Ragoonath: [00:15:30] At that Hog Heaven barbecue restaurant it was called Lexington style. You know, the Lexington style is based more vinegar. You know, then they have the Carolina, South Carolina style, which is more ketchup. Or not ketchup, what do you call it? Mustard-based. And then they have like, Eastern Carolina, where they go with the ketchup-base. So I kind of learned all of that. But, if I'm making barbecue here, I use the same recipe that I use at Hog Heaven, which is the vinegar-base, so.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:16:04] So you get into the food business, why not Trini food?

David Ragoonath: [00:16:12] In Charlotte, didn't have the, you know. It still don't have the—what

you call it?

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:16:20] The clientele?

David Ragoonath: [00:16:21] The clientele that would, you know, patronize you. We do it on Saturday. We do do Trini food on Saturday. But we get a little, you know, a little bit of people coming in. And then the local folks around, you know, they are like, "Oh, I'll try it. I'll try the curry chicken," or "I'll try the curry goat."

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:16:37] Yeah, that's great. So what did you learn from Lula's, is that what it's called?

David Ragoonath: [00:16:49] Lola's?

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:16:50] Lola's, that you still use here? How was your experience there? This is essentially—

David Ragoonath: [00:16:55] Everything you see here is what we did at Lola's. And at Lola's, once Miss Dot, she left, I did all the cooking.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:17:06] Now, did people—were people skeptical of again, an Indian-appearing guy making this kind of food?

David Ragoonath: [00:17:14] Oh yeah. Especially once the IAA come around and we have a big crowd. And then they are, "Man, that's some good collard green. Where's the cook? Tell him to come on out and say hello." So I go there, and they was like, "Who are you?" You know, like,

"Well you asked for the cook, I'm the cook." It shocked them, but. They were happy to know that at least, you know, the food is very tasty.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:17:43] I mean, how do you react when people react to you like that?

David Ragoonath: [00:17:48] It's just normal. You know, what brings me happiness is to see when people taste the food and they go, "Oh man. That's good!" You know, that brings happiness to me. Even if they don't [*inaudible*] just walk by the door I know I made somebody happy. Because, I think food on the whole is a comforting experience. And if you enjoying it, you know, it's better. I've been to restaurants and stuff to eat, and I pay my money and I walk up there, dissatisfied. I'm never going back there again. You know, that kind of thing? And when people come here and they're like, "I'll see you, I'll be back," you know it just makes me feel happy. You know, that I'm doing something right. And then when you read all the stuff that they post—on the media and social media, you know, I couldn't ask for anything better.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:18:49] Wow.

David Ragoonath: [00:18:49] You gotta take the good with the bad.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:18:49] Right.

David Ragoonath: [00:18:49] But I teach everybody to be courteous. Make sure the food is right. If you know it's not right, let us know, we will fix it. See how like the taste of the chicken. Everybody knows what to do.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:19:06] Yeah. And if it's not right you gotta bring it back and do it right.

When somebody comes here you trying to get them to have, like, just. How do you gauge what's good? How do you gauge what is good for you guys? Is it really [faucet turns on] about making the best, like do you want people to be like, "This is the best soul food restaurant in the city.

David Ragoonath: [00:19:32] No, that wasn't my intentions. Everybody says so. You know, they've been to other places. And when they come here, they say, "Oh I'm reading so much about you, and I hear—I have to come try you because I eat soul food here and there," and they call the names, you know? And I say, "Oh yeah, man. Whatever you want. Want to try it before you buy it? You can do that. Let me give you a sample." And they're like—you don't get that anywhere else, you know, today you buy it and then taste it. No, I believe in my food. So, I give you a taste. You don't like it, the door is there. You like it, sit down and enjoy it, you know what I'm saying? So, it's not like I want to be the best. I know my food is good because I put all my heart in it. And all my love when I do something. You know, it don't matter. When I'm bowling, when I home with the family, you know, I'm all in. So it's the same thing, same way when I go about my daily life.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:20:33] What made you go from Lola's to this?

David Ragoonath: [00:20:37] Well, what happened is the building that Lola's was in closed down. Because it was sold to someone else, and the space that Lola's had, they wanted that space. So, once the lease was up, they were like, "Well, okay. We need the space now. We can give you another space at the back but you got to outfit it." Which was like \$700,000, and the owner of Lola's was like, "No." So in April of 2016, he shut the door, we all went home. And I was home for like three months, and my buddy, he knew I was looking for something to do. And he was willing to come in partnership with me [phone rings] because, you know, financially I couldn't do it on my own. And he was like, "I just saw this on Craig's List, let's go check it out." So we saw this place on Central, which is now Soul Central [phone rings]. And I walked in, the guy say he's asking X a month. Said,

"Okay, let's take a look around," we put some pen to paper, and we were like, "Let's put an offer."

And we offered it, and he was like, "Okay." And that's it.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:21:52] Hmm. Did you build out this whole place?

David Ragoonath: [00:21:52] No, it was, like I said—

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:21:53] It was a restaurant like this?

David Ragoonath: [00:21:54] Everything was here. The only thing I added was one [*inaudible*].

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:22:02] Wow. So right now it's a sort of take-out place.

David Ragoonath: [00:22:06] Yeah, mostly take-out place. I mean, we have some—

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:22:08] —we can sit down—

David Ragoonath: [00:22:09] —because customers wait for the fried chicken or something. But some people sit and eat.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:22:11] Do you imagine it getting bigger? Or what's the dream for that?

David Ragoonath: [00:22:17] A lot of customers saying that we should get bigger. But you know, going bigger is bigger headaches. You know? Here I can control. Bigger, you need more—
manpower and more managerial position opening up. That means it's more financially. And right now we're not ready for that. So, we're enjoying it as it is.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:22:44] What's the dish on your menu that you are most proud of?

David Ragoonath: [00:22:52] Our meatloaf.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:22:52] Really? I mean, why that one over—I thought you were going to say your fried chicken.

David Ragoonath: [00:22:57] Well, you know, I could tell you everything but the one that I'm really passionate about is the meatloaf because you can't go every where and find the meatloaf as tasty as this. The one thing I noticed when I—before I even started doing soul food or even knew what real meatloaf taste like, you know. Even in New York when I ordered meatloaf, I'm sure it used to be from a frozen block of meat, that's stuffed in the oven and re-heat or whatever, you know. And when you taste it you get that beef taste in your mouth, and at the end, you still have that, you know, reoccurring taste like if you burp or something, you know?

David Ragoonath: [00:23:46] So, this recipe is actually Lola's recipe, but I infuse a couple of mine own ingredients, you know. So at Lola's it was one of the best- selling items also. And once Lola's closed the door, when I came, I knew, I had everything, I've used the menu. So, I don't have anything written down anywhere. As a recipe. So, when we came here and we opened up, I was like, "Well, I'm going to make this mine." You know.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:24:27] How did you do that?

David Ragoonath: [00:24:27] So. I added two other ingredients to what we did at Lola's [*inaudible*].

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:24:27] Okay. Who is Lo—tell me about Lola? Who is Lola?

David Ragoonath: [00:24:45] Lola's, from what I heard was this guy, his dad told him if he wants to open a restaurant he will help him. And he said, "Okay." So they opened a restaurant and they got the name from his grandmother. You know, so he brought that name with him. So when Lola's closed, I asked him to use that name here, so we'd keep that name going. If he should ever come back to Charlotte and want to open [cell phone rings] and open a second branch. I'm here, you go there. You know everything that I know. You know?

David Ragoonath: [00:25:22] [Customer comes in and David greets her] How are you? This one I got to take.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:25:25] Go *[laughs]!* *[Pauses the audio recorder.]*

David Ragoonath: [00:25:25] Yeah, so Lola's was located in Uptown Charlotte in the AT&T Building. So like I said, when AT&T sold that building and the new ownership wanted that space, you know, we had to move out.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:25:53] That's great. Very. Sorry to take you away from all this.

David Ragoonath: [00:25:59] Oh no, no. It's going to be making noise.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:26:04] So the owner didn't want the name to continue or—?

David Ragoonath: [00:26:07] Right. So, I told him, I said, "Bruce. I found a space. Going open it up. If you're not going to open another store, can I use the name? I'll keep the name alive for you if

you should ever decide to go back in the business. It'll be there. Because people know it." Like, "Now how am I going to do that?" I said, "I mean, I'm not pressuring you. You know, it's to be a good thing. People know it. And if you stop it, you know, some people may forget about you." But he did open a store in the [North Carolina] mountains. Its name is Lola's. So he's up in Brevard County.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:26:49] So to talk a little bit about your life outside of here, I mean, in terms of your food. You know, I think black people from all around the world who try to sort of like, connect with each other in different ways. How has your, sort of, your intimate connection with I mean, soul food is African-American food, black American food. Does that translate to your life outside of here? How has that mattered, and what does it mean to you to be sort of so into like, I mean, you know now you're one of the best—you're one of the names in town—in terms of soul food. Like what does that mean?

David Ragoonath: [00:27:36] Well, I'll tell you the truth. On the islands Trinidad and Tobago, or even most of the Caribbean islands, when we cook, we cook with a lot of flavor. You know. And we never buy seasoning in the bottles and stuff, everything was in the yard. You go, you pick a sprig of this, and a piece of that. And you blend it up and you make a season. So we still do that here. I would buy some green seasoning up in the supermarket and ground it up and we mix it into this. But to your point, when I do stuff like this, again, it's passion. I do it with a lot of love, so. And I think a couple of folks that come to the store and they tasted the food it's like, "He cooks just like us." You know. So that's exactly what you say, you know? And I told them, "Yeah, I mean, I'm black. Don't let this [*makes a gesture*] fool you." [*Laughs*]

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:28:35] Right, right [*Laughs*].

David Ragoonath: [00:28:35] Because a lot of people are shocked when they walk in here, if [inaudible] is not here, and it's just my sister-in-law and I and they're like, "Where's the black people?" You know. And one day I told the guys, "I'm black."

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:28:43] I mean, so this is, you know when I came in here, I see the Trini flag but you don't—this is not like some kind of a fusion thing. It's not like a Trini/soul food fusion, for you it's like you just making, really, soul food.

David Ragoonath: [00:29:04] Yeah, pretty much. But like I say I have a couple ingredients that I would use as a—in the Trini food. And that's—but I wanted to stay as close as possible to what people call soul food, just with a little more flavor.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:29:19] Why is that important?

David Ragoonath: [00:29:24] Because I've seen it, and I've heard it, that, you know when people open a store and they call it soul food restaurant, and you go in there and you taste—because I've been to a couple of them, just, you know, see competition and stuff. Not saying who I am or anything. And I've heard people comment and, "They say it's soul food, but that don't look like soul food," or "It don't taste like soul food." It's just like seasoned with salt and pepper. You know. So when they walk in this store and they taste the food, the experience they get from just the taste, you know, makes it mouth-water more. You know, I have people sit down here, when you go over to say hi to them, I was like, "Is everything all right?" They was like, "Yeah." And then when they say it, they say it in such a way I was like, "So what's wrong?" They was like, "I just didn't want to stop eating." You know, I mean, that raises my hair up, just to hear that. They don't want it to end, you know?

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:30:25] That's incredible. That's incredible. That's a good story, and I didn't realize it was this relatively new. So it's pretty new.

David Ragoonath: [00:30:31] Well, I can say I have the experience from before. So, the business is new, but what we do is not new.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:30:42] In terms of your menu and maybe even your location, I know you said that you didn't want—you're not ready to expand yet, but what's the next level for you? What's the next chapter of this story?

David Ragoonath: [00:30:52] The next chapter is we are looking to do another space.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:30:56] Same idea?

David Ragoonath: [00:30:58] Same everything. I just need to find the right place enough to fit my space. Because it's only me, you know? So once I find that person who's willing to put in. It's hard work, it's just a lot of work, you know, I don't make the work hard at all. It's just a lot of work. So you are nonstop doing something. You know. And since I do all the cooking, you know, it's overwhelming. You know, but I don't mind because like I said, I'm like doing it. My wife would tell you differently [laughs] because she don't see me enough.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:31:36] That's going to be my next question. How's the balance with the— [laughter]—how's the balance with the home life and this because I mean, the restaurant life is just—from what I know but it's just crazy.

David Ragoonath: [00:31:49] Yeah, it does take a lot of your time. But she understands that, you

know, I'm trying to build the business. And once I get to the point where I can walk away, and not have to worry, which, I mean, I think we're there. Because I took ten days off a couple weeks ago, and it continued as if I wasn't—as if I was here. You know, and the reason that happened is because, every seasoning that goes into every dish, I pre-packaged it when I left, so all they have to do was put it in the pot, and put it here, and do what has to be done. So it's like, "Okay, I can do that." You know.

Joseph Ewoodzie: [00:32:33] That's great. All right. I'm to take what I have. I'll probably—

[END INTERVIEW]