

**ADAM ITAYEM**  
**Tom's Bar-B-Q and Deli – Memphis, TN**

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Date: July 20, 2008  
Location: Tom's Bar-B-Q and Deli – Memphis, TN  
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 45 minutes  
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

**[Begin Adam Itayem-Tom's Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Rien Fertel:** Test. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Sunday, July 20, 2008. I am in Memphis, Tennessee, on the Barbecue Trail. I am at Tom's Bar-B-Q and Deli with Adam Itayem. Adam, can you please introduce yourself; give me your name and your birth date?

**00:00:24**

**Adam Itayem:** My name is Adam Itayem; I was born April 5, 1965.

**00:00:27**

**RF:** All right; and—and what's your role here at—at Tom's?

**00:00:33**

**AI:** What's my role? *[Laughs]* What isn't my role here? I do everything here. From seasoning the meat, marinating the meat for the next day, getting everything done that needs to be done before 11 o'clock, 'cause 11 o'clock ready or not they're here. They're knocking on our doors.

**00:00:52**

**RF:** You're the owner of Tom's?

**00:00:53**

**AI:** Yes, sir; I'm the owner. I'm the owner of Tom's Bar-B-Q, yes, sir.

00:00:57

**RF:** And how long have you been the owner of this restaurant?

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**AI:** I've been here since 1995.

00:01:01

**RF:** Okay; so 1995—how long was this—this restaurant had a history before '95. Can you tell me a bit about it?

00:01:06

**AI:** Sure; it's been here for at least 50 years. It used to be a little diner, a little—little deli, cold-cuts you know, sandwiches, wings you know—whatever they had back then, and little—it was actually like a little service station. And this whole area was not developed at that time. It was just one main road. And then Tom eventually got it; his first start—he first started on President Island believe it or not. And he opened up the barbecue and I happened to find out in '95 that it was—he was looking to, you know find a way out of this and he tried to give it to his children and it didn't work out too good. And I had a partner that introduced me to the business and took it from there.

00:01:57

**RF:** What was Tom's full name—his last name?

00:01:59

**AI:** Tom Sturgis.

00:02:01

**RF:** And he was the owner for that 50-year period or he took it over from someone else?

00:02:06

**AI:** No; he's—I think he was here at least 20 years. He was at least 20 years here and he was Greek, heavy Greek accent; didn't speak a lot of English but he was a master with the seasoning and the—the barbecue pit. He had a good following believe it or not; it was—.

00:02:22

**RF:** And so he was the one that introduced barbecue at this location?

00:02:24

**AI:** Yes; he introduced it and he started the barbecue business here at Tom's Bar-B-Q, yes—at this location.

00:02:29

**RF:** Okay; so in—in '95 when you came in, did you have a career, a restaurant career?

00:02:35

**AI:** I started in White Haven. I had a deli in White Haven and we started barbecuing there and I was introduced to—from a mutual friend, a business partner that wanted to introduce me to the barbecue. It—and I came over here with him. It looked like an old shack ready to fall over,

siding ready to peel off, gravel—I mean it’s not a place that you probably wanted to think of coming inside, and I said what are you bringing me to? This is an old shack; it looks like a little dinky barn ready to fall over. He goes, dinky barn; he says, come Monday—I think that was like a Saturday. It was closed on Saturday. He said come Monday and see what happens. I came here Monday with him and he had a line out the door of people you know and it was busy. I couldn’t figure it out. I couldn’t believe it. And the price was right; and you know I—my partner, he was going to run it for me and I was going to stay on the sidelines and continue with the deli. But I quickly found out that after—after we kept on fixing and improving that it was not enough for one person to actually be able to run it. It needed a good crew. Started off with three people; three people and my partner and it eventually grew up to now we have 13 people. It didn’t take much to grow real quickly.

**00:03:50**

**RF:** Right; and—and you’re very busy. What—what was the name of the barbecue place or the restaurant that you ran in—in White Haven just to get the full history?

**00:03:57**

**AI:** Yes; it was Pop’s Grocery and Deli. My brothers and I, we started there—I started that in 1992, and it was in White Haven, Shelby Drive at Tulane, a little—tough little corner. I wasn’t there full-time; I was there part-time and weekends. I was working in my field. I have an Engineering Degree, so it just grew so big that I had to let go of the other business after about five years of working with that company and running that deli.

**00:04:25**

**RF:** Did it—I mean you said you ran it with your brothers. It sounds like you come from—do you come from a restaurant family?

**00:04:29**

**AI:** Yes, sir; I grew up in the deli environment. My hometown is Cleveland, Ohio and I grew up around—I don't know if you're familiar with this—it's called the West Side Market. We—we had a little deli right—a half a block down the street from the West Side Market. The West Side Market, I've never seen anything like it. It's an indoor like coliseum with all ethnicities there from strudel to oriental, Asian, Indian, to Middle Eastern inside and then they had an outside vegetable and produce stands—it was humongous. It was open Monday through Saturday, every single day. If it snowed, it rained; it was open. And particularly Saturday you would see a whole—you'd see thousands of people down there. I think it's still there. It was—and growing up in that environment in that area really helped me out. My father who grew up—my father—corned beef deli, gyros, deep—deep-fried wings, so I grew up in that environment and with a little Spanish twist to it, you know.

**00:05:30**

**RF:** So your family owned a stand or stall in this market?

**00:05:35**

**AI:** We had actually a little convenience store/deli down the street from the West Side Market, and it—there was—there was a neighborhood over there also, so everybody in that area knew us.

**00:05:45**

**RF:** Was—was there a barbecue culture in Cleveland?

**00:05:50**

**AI:** I don't remember too much of barbecue to be honest with you. I mean the barbecue that we knew—we grew up with, it was all barbecue-based you know. We didn't know nothing about putting rub on you know—a dried rub you know. We thought that we just—the barbecue you had to keep on brushing the barbecue sauce and flipping it. That's what I grew up remembering what barbecue was.

**00:06:11**

**RF:** All right; so you were born in Cleveland?

**00:06:13**

**AI:** No; I was born in Jerusalem.

**00:06:16**

**RF:** Okay; so you were born in Jerusalem. That's—that's really interesting to go from Jerusalem to barbecue.

**00:06:19**

**AI:** Well yes.

**00:06:21**

**RF:** Can you tell me a bit about—about Jerusalem and growing up there?

00:06:24

**AI:** Sure; I was born in Jerusalem and I left when I was five. My sister and I were born there and I have three other brothers that were born here in the United States. We moved to Detroit; my father came here first. To give you a little history: my grandfather came before my father. My grandfather was in Baltimore; he had a pool hall in Baltimore. Early—you're talking about middle 1800s and he met my grandmother and she was from—she was English. She was from Liverpool and they went back for a visit to Jerusalem and they ended up living there and raising my father and my—his brothers and sisters. So my father eventually came back here in the middle of the 1960s and started back up. So we all moved in; my uncles moved in—my uncle—my uncle moved in here in the early 1900s back, so it was like a twist moving back you know, coming there.

00:07:17

**RF:** Are you Palestinian or Israeli?

00:07:19

**AI:** Well my ancestors—my grandfather and father are Palestinian and my grandmother is English, so [*Laughs*] you know whatever you want to call that. I consider myself an American—my heritage and my ancestry is Palestinian.

00:07:34

**RF:** Is there any history or culture of smoked meats similar to barbecue or maybe not so similar to barbecue in the Eastern Mediterranean?

**00:07:43**

**AI:** It's a little bit different. It's—it's a twist between something like Hawaiian. What they do is they do barbecue and they use coals but a different kind of coals. It's the original old type of coals, you know those chunks. It's not the—something that's glued together or put together and what they do is they—they dig a hole. What they have is like an oven and what they—it's on the—it's real low on the ground and what they do is they dig a hole in there and they put the charcoal and let it—the coals die down a little bit and then they put a little bit of the dirt and then they put the meats. They wrap it up with grape leaves, and then they wrap it up with foil and put it in there and cover it back up with dirt and then that brick oven. It just happened that last—I went back there two years ago, and I had a chance to see a one-on-one experience. My—my wife's brother-in-law did it for us and he had a special oven for that, and it was awesome to be honest with you. So the—it's a different kind of barbecue but the—the seasoning is very close—the oregano, the pickle spice, the cayenne pepper, the cumin, the nutmeg, you know it's all there—that Mediterranean flavor is all there. The seasoning is there. I mean the Middle East is known. The Middle East grease, the Mediterranean area especially that area is well known for its spices you know.

**00:09:12**

**RF:** Right; what—what kind of meat did they barbecue?

**00:09:13**

**AI:** Mostly there, even the Christians, even the Christian side, my—my wife is Christian and her brother-in-law is Christian also—it's mostly to be honest with you because of the heat and the

climate there it's mostly lamb and goat—lamb and goat and a little bit of beef, you know some beef and chicken you know—not too much pork. You have to really look—go out of your way to find it; it's not readily available there because of the Jewish community and the Palestinian community and even the Christian community—it's a small sector there.

00:09:44

**RF:** And one more question about that. Did—do they have a name for the process or is it—?

00:09:49

**AI:** The smoking?

00:09:49

**RF:** Yeah.

00:09:50

**AI:** Well they call it the *dakhana*, which is called smoke. If you want to take the translation—smoked you know. It's smoked, *dakhana*, and it's done and it's almost like if you've ever seen the pizza ovens, the old pizza ovens but not sitting up high. They use the ground; they use it—and what they do is even though it's bricked around they still cover the whole thing with dirt afterwards you know and they only have one opening with a pipe you know for letting out a little bit of the—the smoke come out.

00:10:19

**RF:** So do you—have you carried over any—any of that history and culture to what you cook here, any of the spice rub or anything?

**00:10:29**

**AI:** I'll be honest with you; no. Most of what's here is the way that Tom Sturgis set it up. I mean his seasoning it's about 15 different spices and the rub that he makes and I mean if it—if it isn't broken don't fix it. I haven't changed the recipe; it's the same original recipe that he has. It's an awesome Greek rub that he has and this barbecue sauce compliments it, you know. And everything that we cook here is marinated with the rub and then at least 24-hours, even the bologna, the rib tips, the ribs—everything is marinated at least 24-hours.

**00:11:06**

**RF:** With that same rub?

**00:11:07**

**AI:** With the same rub and some of the shoulders are there 48-hours, 72-hours before we even put it in the pit.

**00:11:15**

**RF:** And—and you described some spices before; can you say it again what makes it Greek, the rub that you use here?

**00:11:19**

**AI:** Sure; you've got the—you've got the oregano, you've got the thyme, you've got the nutmeg, you've got the—the pickle spice—the pickle spice, you've got the cayenne pepper and a little bit of cinnamon, the basil, you know. We're not giving out all the secrets in there.

**00:11:37**

**RF:** Right, right; you would not tell me everything. So you rub everything—?

**00:11:41**

**AI:** Every—every single thing that's cooked in here is done with that except the chicken. We do a little bit more; we use the rub and then we use a little bit of seasoning salt. We use some of the—we use season salt for that.

**00:11:53**

**RF:** And can you—can you kind of describe the sauce to me, what kind of—what's it based on?

**00:11:58**

**AI:** Sure; it's not a very vinegary—it's—it's tomato-based, more of the tomato-based, very little—very little vinegar, not very much vinegar. I don't like vinegar too much and Tom, the original owner, didn't like vinegar very much. Got some brown sugar in there, got some nice sauce, a pureed tomato sauce—puree. You just time—you just got to—you can't rush. One thing I've learned here is it's not when you want the barbecue to be ready; it's when the barbecue wants to be ready because depending on the temperature outside, the wind on the chimneys, on the stacks—it's all going to make the barbecue cook. I mean sometimes the pit is running very fast and you have—you can't use too many coals and sometimes you have to use more coals. It's

really weird, you know. As much as you think—if you sit there five years and you work on that pit and you come in the next day and you’re going to think it’s the same—it’s going to be the same exact day she will trick you. You’ll find out that one day that it’s not that easy. I mean sometimes on the right side it’s very hot and you have to move a little bit more to the left and sometimes it’s more hot to the left and that’s the nature of that open—that pit—that open pit barbecue. We use only charcoal and hickory wood. That’s all we use. We use different layers—the different shelves in the—in the pit to get the smoked—we start off on the first level. It’s a little bit hot there; it’s at least 260—265. We move it to the second shelf; it’s about 225 and then on the third shelf it’s probably about 175 on the, you know—. So we move it; we start from the first layer and we move it slowly and it’s all—there’s no rotisserie involved. It’s all human touch that’s involved in it. You can’t walk away from the pit; it will catch on fire if you’re not there to watch it.

**00:13:48**

**RF:** So who—who taught you all of this process, all—all these barbecue you know tips of the trade or did you teach yourself?

**00:13:56**

**AI:** Well Tom had the—Tom, the owner here, he had three women that were here for a while, and he had one for 15 years, he had one for 20 years, he had one for another 10 years; I learned from them to be honest with you. And I’m a quick learner; I’m a very quick learner and I’ll take what they taught me and that’s just my experience in the deli and I can push it a little bit. I mean when we started off with one pit—small pit and that was not enough. And I had to use my place at White Haven to keep up with the barbecue. I had to cook the shoulders down there actually

even—down there. I had built a pit down there to keep up with everything. And then eventually here I opened up a larger pit. We call it the Tom Submarine; it's humongous. You've seen one side of it; there is another side of it over there. I mean that—that barbecue—. And I even designed special boxes underneath; it runs a little bit more efficient. The drippings come in—in the box and they fall into another tray. It still can catch on fire but it's not as dangerous as you did before, you know. And the coals, the ashes go to the bottom of the tray also, so it's—it's not a lot of shoveling you know. What we have is a little cart; we come with a little basket—a little basket. We take the hot coals straight outside on a little cart. Before it was just on a—on a steel tray and every night you had to shovel it out and it was a little messy. It's a lot easier the way I've done—I used my engineering **[Laughs]** knowledge to design that and I don't think anybody uses that, so—.

00:15:29

**RF:** You've mentioned fire a few times; have you ever had an accident?

00:15:31

**AI:** I've—not all the way you know. The farthest that this has gone is that the stack will catch on fire. We put it out; there's a little—we have everything here. We're pretty—pretty much prepared for anything here. We have the big fire extinguishers, the carbon—the soda, and we put it out. The only thing is sometimes if it goes to the stack and it goes up too high it's hard to put that out. We've had the fire department come out here twice at least you know, just to put out the fire in the stack but not inside the barbecue—thank God. You know we'll catch it before—there's a little technique. It's how you spray and where you spray. You don't spray from the top; you spray way down from the bottom and you just—you—you get the oxygen out of there that

the fire will come out by itself. Little trick, but if you spray water in the wrong location you'll actually make it worse. It's like—it's like not throwing water on an open flame. You don't do that. You have to extinguish it from—where the air source is.

**00:16:26**

**RF:** Right; but—but you're still able to use water to extinguish the flame?

**00:16:29**

**AI:** Yeah; we—we try first water and [*Laughs*] if that doesn't work then we use the carbon soda, you know 'cause the carbon soda is—is the same stuff that they use—you'd find in soda pop you know—a drink.

**00:16:41**

**RF:** So you said you have an Engineering Degree. Where did you get that Degree from?

**00:16:44**

**AI:** I got it from Chicago, ITC up in Chicago. It's more electrical but you know the designing aspect we took—I took a lot of engineering, drawing, lot of physics, lot of chemistry; I started in Cleveland and I went to Cleveland State University and I finished it off in Chicago.

**00:17:02**

**RF:** Has that helped you with barbecuing because it seems to me if you—if you're going—in a kitchen an Engineering Degree might help with barbecue more than it will help with let's say I don't know—frying chicken or something?

**00:17:14**

**AI:** Well I—I was very good in math. I mean before—when I was eight years old I was running a register, so I was good in math. I was good in physics and I was good in chemistry. I wanted to get out of the business to be honest with you when I was growing up. I—I promised myself I’m going to get out of it ‘cause it’s a tough business. It’s a lot of hours; it’s kind of hectic. I tried to get out of it. But my experience in growing up in the business I found that’s—that was my niche you know. I wish I would have went for Business Management instead of Engineering but sometimes you chase your tail and then you find yourself back where you started from. And I was good at it and I was good with people, so engineering, I mean it was—it was experience. I had nothing ventured and nothing gained. I’ve used the engineering for building—building up the barbecue and I’ve used it in the air-conditioning, the flooring that we had to replace, the—the patio in the front, the patio in the back; we have already had six different air-conditions in here, and so far I mean—engineering helped out in that aspect.

**00:18:12**

**RF:** And let’s talk about the food. You cook shoulders; can you tell me the process of cooking shoulders here?

**00:18:22**

**AI:** Sure; when we start the process we use—we start it off actually—we used to use a Boston butt. The only problem with the Boston butt, the problem with the Boston butt is it doesn’t have too much shelf life to be honest with you. I mean it’s good if you’re going to cater something and you’re going to use the meat right there and then—and don’t—and you’ve got to be careful with

the Boston butt. It doesn't take much you know. You can over—you can overpower it with hickory. It's a little more delicate meat. I use the shoulder; I don't use the very fatty shoulder. I use the—the medium-sized shoulder. It's got a little bit of fat. You need a little bit of fat with this open pit. I mean a lot of people are using this hickory smoked—smokers; you don't need a lot of fat 'cause all you're pumping in is smoke from the side in an oven atmosphere. And you don't have no fires or anything like that. We need a little bit of fat in the shoulder because we're opening that open pit and the drippings that are coming down is actually helping to smoke the meat besides—without—it's not just the rub on the meat. It's the drippings from the meat, hitting the coals, and smoking back up. That you can't duplicate in those smokers; you can duplicate the hickory but you can't duplicate that—that sizzle from the grease coming back from the—from the coals on the meat.

**00:19:37**

**RF:** Right; have you—have you ever seen—I think you're referring to electric cookers. Have you ever seen them in action?

**00:19:43**

**AI:** Yes; I have. I have seen them.

**00:19:45**

**RF:** Have you—have you ever tested one out?

**00:19:47**

**AI:** Sure; I've tasted it. I've tested it. It's too clean; it tastes too clean. You know I've tasted some of the—the businesses around here and I've checked out those smokers. You know the salesman has taken me—it's a lot more—you're going to get—it costs more. It's less cost-effective; you know what I mean. You don't have to use a lot of manpower to run it. It takes a lot of human contact out of it. I don't like that, you know. It's too auto(mized) for me, you know. I like this open pit. This is the way Tom did it; he used the open pit and he used—he marinated his meat. He used the Greek rub. I didn't change that; I didn't want to change any of that to be honest with you. I want—people want to see a little piece of burnt spot on their hot—on their smoked sausage or bologna or your rib or the shoulder. They don't want to see something perfect. I mean they're—perfect, well then we'll get a machine to make everything for us you know. It's got the human touch, the human involvement in the meat you know. We—even the rub—putting the rub on, we—we do it by hand, you know—making the rub, throwing it in—putting it in a cooler. You know I get a chance and I'll show you the—the marinated shoulders that are in the back and the ribs that are marinated. I don't know it's just—I like the old-fashioned part of the—the barbecue, you know. I mean if they take the human touch out of the barbecue and then I don't know if you want to call it barbecue anymore.

**00:21:14**

**RF:** All right; and—and tell me. There's one more menu item I think—well there's one that I think gets a lot of recognition and that's the—the rib tips. Can you talk about them? Well what part of the animal are they exactly and then how do you cook them? What do you do with them?

**00:21:30**

**AI:** We call them rib tips just to make it simple for a lot of people but they're actually St. Louis loin button bone rib tips. Okay; they're not—they're not actually cut from the rib. A lot of places what they do is they take the brisket part of the rib and they cut it down and call it a rib tip. We get—we have the rib tip actually specially cut for us; it's cut from the loin, shaved right off the vertebrae down the back of the loin, so you got those little—the bones that are left in the—with the meat with the loin meat looks like buttons. So that's why they call them button bone rib tips and that's something that Tom originally brought to this—the barbecue. I don't think anywhere else has them. I haven't seen them anywhere else. I've—it used to be two companies that used to make it for us; we're down to one company that only makes it for us and we're still researching and looking for other companies to—to make it for us. It's an awesome product; it's very specialized and that's what we're known for—the rib tips you know.

00:22:33

**RF:** Do they—do they cook fast or slow? How long do you cook them for?

00:22:37

**AI:** You have to be careful with them. I mean we—we put the rub on there; we put the same rub that we use on our shoulders. It's done on the—the first level of the pit and takes about 265-degrees and you've got to be careful and you've got to keep on moving them. And again they're loin tips, so it doesn't take much to burn them and you have to keep on moving them. You—there's no time; like I told you. One—one minute it will take an hour and a half; sometimes they take two hours. It depends on the climate. In the winter it takes even longer. You have to be careful; you have to move them away from the heat sometimes and let them just catch up you

know. Don't—you don't want to cook them too fast because you'll cook the seasoning out.

You'll burn the seasoning off the rib tips.

**00:23:13**

**RF:** And I've—I've done several interviews and—and you're the first person that said that the—that the temperature and the weather in Memphis affects barbecuing. Can you talk about that? I've—I've never heard that.

**00:23:24**

**AI:** Well it does. I mean right now for example you've got—we've got over 90-degree weather. It doesn't take much 'cause the way I've designed the pits it's got special bricks that we use. It's industrial bricks; they take about—they take about 1,000-degrees. I started—when I first rebuilt the pit I didn't know nothing about the pit. I used regular fire brick. I said—I went to—I went to a mortar place where they built brick—made bricks and I said I want some fire brick. They gave me fireplace bricks. That lasted about a month to be honest with you before they—it just couldn't take the heat. It just fell apart like—like sand. So I did a little more research and I found in this industrial park I found a place where they actually build industrial brick that can withstand you know 1,000-degrees. And that just radiates real, real nice in the—in the pit, but depending on the heat and humidity, everything changes. I mean in the winter it takes longer; it takes more coals. In the summer it takes less coals and if I have a nice wind up on top and it's blowing the same direction, the right direction, I can get really good—my pit is—is really efficient, but if it—it blows the opposite direction and sometimes blows back in my chimney and then I have to slow it down and it takes longer for me to cook because we start sucking in the smoke from the—the chimney. It doesn't happen very often; it's weird. I can't describe it. I've tried to design the—the

stacks in a way that it—I will utilize the best—no matter which flow the—the air is coming from, the east or west or north and south; I will get the best efficiency of sucking up the—the bad smoke, you know the smoke that comes from the charcoal. And I've tried fans—didn't work; the fans don't work. They won't last you know so the best is using—you know designing the stacks, you know to utilize the wind.

**00:25:16**

**RF:** Tell—tell me about the neighborhood that we're—that we're in. I mean I should say we're at 4087 Getweell Road, kind of southeast Memphis. Can you describe the neighborhood and maybe the clientele?

**00:25:30**

**AI:** Sure; I'll be—be honest with you when I first got here in '95 the majority of the business if—if it wasn't 98, maybe 97—96-percent of the business was from people working here. This is an industrial park area; it's all warehouses, manufacturing, Nike, Reebok distribution center; it's only about less than 10 minutes from the airport. It's very close to Fed-Ex. Fed-Ex is very closeby. And the majority of the people that come in this neighborhood are—if you're not—there's a lot of people that if—if you don't know this area you won't come to this area because it's—it's like isolated. It's buffered from the rest of Memphis. We don't get too many strays from anyplace else unless they're in—working in this area. That's the only—or they're flying by through Getwell to get to Mississippi, you know and driving through. I've had people that come up—they've been driving past for 15 years. I had a customer today, he said he's been passing by here for 20 years and didn't stop by. I said why didn't you stop by? He goes I just—coming through the area and I don't have no business here and I'm just going by. I seen the barbecue but

I never thought of coming in. I seen it was a busy place and everything but I—. People are set in their ways it seems like in Memphis. It's—it's either they're going to stop or not going to stop. They have their local stops and after hours—the majority of business is lunch and after like 1:30—2 o'clock we will slow down and it might pick up again around 5 o'clock—4 o'clock, 5 o'clock for the people that are leaving this area that are working in this area that want to take some barbecue back home with them. For the majority of the time, I mean we've been open only 'til 6 o'clock. It was dead after 6 o'clock. The—the neighborhood is now—I'll be honest with you; it's died down because of the economy. A lot of businesses left here and went to different States or moved down to Mississippi where the tax incentives are there. The neighborhood went down. Even though the neighborhood went down my—my business actually increased. And I think it's just word of mouth. We don't advertise very much. I mean we had a couple spots on Fox 13; we had something on PBS. It didn't really give us a real big push but it was—it got the word out. It's just being consistent I think and word of mouth—people just talking. And it's a family business; we're family oriented. We have—I mean these people in here are just like my family and I tell them; if you're not like—if you're not going to be—act like my family or my brother or sister it's not going to be a place for you, 'cause I'm going to spend more time with you than I do with my own family. So we've been—we've been fortunate and we've been blessed; you know the business is still increasing and it's—it's been a challenge. Honestly—because it's not—not everybody wants to get in this kind of business. It's hard to find employees. I'm always looking for new people to train to help us in here—the ones that have been here for a while and I have a good—I have a good—some good workers here. But to find other ones to help them, you know it's been a challenge to be honest with you.

**00:28:33**

**RF:** Do—do employees not want to work—people not want to work in—in a kitchen? Is it the kitchen atmosphere?

**00:28:36**

**AI:** It's—it's not an easy environment. I mean we're pretty busy here; I mean it's pushy, it's loud, it's a little hectic during lunch. It's kind of quiet before lunch 'cause we're busy preparing and then after lunch you know we're busy—ready—getting prepared for the next day. It's—not everybody—this is not a business for everybody. I've tried my own brothers; they can't fit in here. They—it—either you've got the personality or you don't, you know. It's a fast-paced; it can be fast-paced and it can be slow-paced and you've got to slow down when you're cooking the meat but it's fast-paced you know, dealing with the customers, you know.

**00:29:10**

**RF:** How—how long did it take you to adjust back in '95? Was it right away or did it take a little while to adjust to the pace of the business and—and cooking meat which you know big pieces of meat for hours and hours can't be too—too easy?

**00:29:23**

**AI:** No; I'll be honest with you. It's been a challenge. It seems like as much as I think I caught up we have to try to take it to another level. I mean we started off, we didn't—we didn't have a big beef business part of this business. Now we have a big beef business, you know. It's—we do a lot of fish now; we do a lot of catfish and we do a lot of—. I try not to get too—have too big of a menu 'cause it will slow us down and I want to keep something fresh. I don't want to keep something and then—one day it's going to sell and one day it's not going to sell. I try to keep to

a—a strict menu and sometimes we have some specials. But it's been a challenge. I don't think I have—every time I think I've caught up and—and there's no more room for improvement there's always room for improvement you know. There's always—I mean we have built a patio on the front and now I say I wish I would have built it a little bigger. You know and now we're working on actually—we have a—a building next door to us on another lot that we're going—we're thinking of—the catering part of it has really improved and it's not enough room for us here, so we're going to move over there for the catering part and the shipping part. So we're going to try our hands at the shipping and catering and we're going to have a little hall there, too, so we can maybe accommodate a lot of the businesses here for their business meetings 'cause I'll be honest with you; it's—it's flipped. The last couple years I had more of the blue collar workers; now I've got a lot of the white collar businessmen that are coming here and hearing about us and you know like I said this—especially this *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* has brought—it's—it's boosted us at least 20-percent. And it's people from all over Memphis, all over the United States and as far as England you know. It's been phenomenal and I'll be honest with you; I wish I could clone some of my good employees here 'cause it's hard for us to—we increased our business 20-percent with this show—last show and we decreased our employees by 20-percent. So we're—as fast as we can train them you know we're losing them because it's not—not everybody wants to do this. It's a messy job; it's a greasy job a little bit. You go home smelling like barbecue you know and it takes a toll. You're moving all—constantly; you're walking around this little place. I put a little counter on my side one time. I did five miles during half the day you know. You couldn't believe it; how can you walk five miles in a little location you know but it all adds up.

**00:31:46**

**RF:** Right; you were referring to *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives*, the food TV show. Were you prepared for what that would do to your business? Did you know what was coming?

**00:31:54**

**AI:** It—it was slow; it didn't come—it didn't hit real hard, sudden like. I mean they aired it Memorial Day and everybody was already barbecuing that day when it aired and that week, so everybody was already burnt out. They started trickling in after Memorial Day—Memorial week and I'll be honest with you; like today I'll be—I'll bet you at least 70-percent of my customers today are from that show you know, and we're open on Sundays because of that. I mean it's—and sometimes maybe it's not—it's not a very profitable day for us because it takes a little bit more employees to run this and for the—you really have to have enough customers that come in but actually we're getting—it's preparing us for the coming week, so we have to be here anyway so we might as well open the doors. And some days it's not all about profits, you know. I mean the exposure and the people tasting it—I told everybody; I mean what a guy said—the guy from the *Diners, Drive-Ins*—his name is Guy; he says *all aboard the flavor train*, you know. You can hop on the train now and ride it, you know, or watch the train pass you because we have—we're really trying to take advantage of it. If we had to advertise—if we had to pay for this advertisement we couldn't afford it, so the payout—what we're doing in paying for the advertise—the advertisement is the labor and the work and the longer hours and then Sunday. We're going to try to expose as many people as we can to this barbecue and show them that we have a good product and then they will come back again. Hopefully they'll come back again. We have an awesome—I think we have a good service, have a good barbecue, and plus a good service. I think that compliments both of them together.

**00:33:29**

**RF:** Right; I just have a couple more questions. Why do you think people are eating more beef now you said than in the past couple years?

**00:33:32**

**AI:** It's a little more leaner. I use a leaner beef; I don't use that real greasy chunky fatty beef. Just people are—it was hard to find in Memphis a good beef brisket, to be honest with you and once—I think it was just word of mouth. People just seen—and especially they come in here and they know it's a leaner beef and they're telling their friends hey; he has a leaner beef. People are used to pork. They got the impression that it has to be real fatty and dripping with grease, so I think the—the consciousness of being more health conscious they're switching more to beef and chicken.

**00:34:10**

**RF:** Right; have you seen—you've been here 13 years. Have you seen any other changes that are really noticeable?

**00:34:15**

**AI:** Well my—demographics; the customers that I have coming in here it's for example—it used to be the African-American community was probably the majority of my business. Now it's probably only 50-percent. I've got another 25-percent I would say would probably be Hispanic and the other 25-percent is white, you know. That's changed and actually it's been good because now we can have a little bit more flavor. We do a little bit of Spanish twist a little bit. We do—

plus with the Mediterranean twist, it's—it's—it's opened new options for us to be honest with you.

**00:34:52**

**RF:** Right; I mean I—I think this is the only place I've been to where you've taken the—the time to translate your menu into Spanish.

**00:34:57**

**AI:** Yes; we have—we have a Spanish menu and it's helped us a lot and my Spanish has *[Laughs]* improved. One from experience with the Spanish people that I have working with me, and you know I took it in high school for a year. I wish I would have took it more. I took more of French you know. I don't—I don't know what I was thinking about but Spanish is the language you know. We've got a big Spanish community here and they're hard-working people and they spend, you know. If they find a good product they'll—they're very loyal to that product.

**00:35:28**

**RF:** Tell me; what do you think makes barbecue so tied into Memphis. Why—why do you think people eat and fight about barbecue in this City? *[Laughs]*

**00:35:41**

**AI:** You know what? I was—I was living in Chicago and then they had a *Taste of Chicago* and I—and I ate the barbecue there and it was a dry-based barbecue and nothing like I've ever tasted before. And I couldn't figure out where did this come from until I moved here in '92. That highway between Memphis and Chicago and St. Louis, there's some—a lot of good things

coming out of that highway and a lot of bad things, but I think it has to do with the history you know the southern, charcoal, the rubbing of the meat. The rub—you have to have the rub; it's not cooking with the sauce. And it's on a larger scale than any place I've ever seen to be honest with you. I mean it seems like everybody eats, walks, talks, and works about barbecue here. I mean which is great you know for us; I mean you'll see—you have teams. You know people have teams, family teams, teams all over Memphis of barbecue, you know and they're getting involved in contests. And everybody has their own recipe. Everybody has their own twist on their sauce—sauce. Everybody has a little twist on their rub you know. I'd love to get into part of—some of the parts of the competition but I'm just—this is—this is too much work for me here, you know. I'm already spreading myself thin just here to be honest with you; I can't do anymore. *[Laughs]*

00:37:03

**RF:** Growing up did you—did you eat pork?

00:37:03

**AI:** I—I was exposed to pork and I ate pork I'll be honest with you. Yes I have; I had the luxury of living on both sides. I went to Catholic schools and I have a great mix of everything. This is the great American melting pot. You can't find it anyplace else.

00:37:19

**RF:** Right; do—do you still love to eat barbecue? Do you—do you tire of it sometimes?

00:37:21

**AI:** I'll be honest with you; I like—I do a little twist here. I mean I'll use the meat. I'll do the barbecue chicken and sometimes I'll do barbecue lamb. I didn't ever put it on the menu. I don't think—I don't know how many people would be willing to try it. It's a lot of work involved. There's a little more steps involved in the lamb because you have to clean it a little bit more. There's special techniques to clean it. **[Laughs]** We do a lot of things; I have some—I'll sauté some vegetables and I'll do some noodles. I'll do some Mediterranean rice; I mean we—I'll do everything and I'll add the barbecue. I'll add the beef to it. I'll do the chicken with it. I'll put the lamb with it. It's—it's a challenge. It's—I try to be health conscious you know. I don't eat a lot of bread. I don't—I don't use a lot of sauce. I don't drink—I don't need a lot of sauce with my meat. I like to dip it a little bit. It just—it seems like that sauce is just—it accents the rub to be honest with you.

00:38:16

**RF:** Do you have children and are you encouraging them to go into the restaurant business?

00:38:19

**AI:** Well you know they—they come here and volunteer. They help out on the—during the week. They're in California visiting their grandparents right now and so they're—since this show they've been helping and volunteering and helping out. They're always cooking—even at home; they're—they're always involved with cooking, so when they come here they—they don't want to just wait on the customers. They don't want to ring up the—a customer on the register; they want to actually help do the strawberry shortcake, make the banana pudding, do the chicken—make the chicken salad and do the different salads that we have. I don't discourage them, but you know I—if that's what they want to do, you know, I wish—I hope they—if they want it at least

I've got a base for them and if they can take it to some higher level that I—you know, that I can't, you know, maybe I'm not aware of how to do it, you know. This new technology and internet and everything—why not; if they want to get in part of it I don't have no problem with it, but I think they're all headed—they're heading in the direction they—they want to know—they know where they're going you know. I don't discourage them and I don't push them so hard. If they don't want to come I don't bring them here to be honest with you. That's a lot of work. There's a lot of man-hours. I mean I do over 100 hours a week now, you know. I don't know if I want them to get involved in something that takes so much time, you know. Maybe if you know—a couple of them, a couple of the kids that want to take over the business and they can share the responsibility, they won't have to put so much hours—yes. It's just—it's a tough business to be in and it's not as profitable as it used to be. Beef has gone up crazy; pork has gone crazy; I mean pork has gone up for my shoulders 25-cents just in one month. This—I mean we're looking for alternate fuels and one of it is ethanol and that's taking away from the food chain. That's taking corn that's used to feed the chickens, the—the pigs, and the cows away. That's raising the prices of all the meats. It's been—I've been micro-managing the last six—eight years; it's not an easy business. It's not an easy business at all.

**00:40:20**

**RF:** Right; and at what point do these price increases you know go so high that you have to make changes? And how—what changes can you make in the barbecue process?

**00:40:29**

**AI:** It's hard to be honest with you. If I go up 10—10-cents sometimes in this working class community it—it—it makes people angry to be honest with you. What I try to do is with my

manpower you know. I try to keep up with you know—I'll do a lot of the work myself and I get involved heavily instead of sitting back. I'm—I don't know; my office is just going in there for a second to grab a piece of paper or—or write a check out. I don't have time to sit in the office anymore. I'm—I try to be very effective on my manpower and payroll you know and keep the prices low. We try to base our business on the family atmosphere. I don't—I don't make it an upper-echelon very fancy restaurant. This—this is the type of place you can wear your jeans or your—your messed up sweaty shirt, paint on it, greasy jeans, messed up tennis shoes, concrete—you're all welcome you know and that's what makes—and it gives it this atmosphere you know—family atmosphere. It's been—it's been tough to be honest with you and I hope the next President really takes a—a big role in slowing down the economy and helping things out because I'll be honest with you. If—if it's going to continue like this half the people are going to lose their jobs up in here. I can't run it like this for too much longer to be honest with you. It's too hard. I'd have to cut my hours and cut half these employees. It won't work like this anymore. It can't. I'm—I want to do an increase but I'm—I'm reluctant. I'm scared to go on an increase to raise my prices.

**00:42:01**

**RF:** And it's—it's—is it because—it's because of cost and not because of—it sounds like you're getting better business than ever before.

**00:42:08**

**AI:** The gross profits is there; the net profit is the problem. I mean you get a fuel surcharge on everything that's delivered. I mean everything is affected. You've got to remember; every time that gas goes up it's got to be shipped from somewhere and it takes gasoline or diesel to bring it

and that has—and it's not as much—not as much trucking out here—companies. There's no mom and pop truckers out here, you know. It's—it's pretty—pretty how you say it—dog eat dog you know out here. You know the strong survive out here and I'll be honest with you; it's been tough. It's been very tough. I've been juggling everything—juggling, micro-managing everything you know on the paper—paper, the billing, payroll taxes—it's been a challenge. I'll be honest with you; and it takes away the good feeling of—of our product. We have a good product. We have good customers. And to always—always look at—you have to now struggle and look at paper all the time and see what—where we're at, you know. Can we make it through the month? Can we make it through the payroll? That's been a challenge to be honest with you. It's been tough—it's very tough.

**00:43:19**

**RF:** Let me ask just one more question. Is—is Tom still around?

**00:43:21**

**AI:** No, unfortunately; he's—he's not. He died I think a year and a half ago, yes, sir. He was—he was—even after—we—we bought the business; he would come at least once every two or three months and come in and check out the barbecue. And every time he would come in he'd find something new in here and he would just shake his head and he had a very heavy Greek accent when he spoke and he'd pick up his new hat. He'd come and get a hat every time he came in here. And it was—it was enjoyable because he would smile a lot because I think, you know, to see something that he started and—and it was still growing, I think it pleased him a lot 'cause we took a lot of pride in what his—in what he—what he did here with his rub, how he cooked the meats on open pits. I'll be honest with you; I think he was a very happy man, you know, and

what we did for him, you know. It's a lot like my father. Growing up in the deli environment, my father was not effective, efficient like—until when I grew up I did—I took it to another level and he's always amazed. I mean he's proud at the same time; he said wow, I wish I would have done that you know. So he always got—I can see that in his eyes you know. I'm proud of you, but I wish I would have thought about that you know.

**00:44:35**

**RF:** Is that right? Okay; well I want to thank you very much. I think that's a good note to end on and yeah if you'd like to add anything—I just want to thank you.

**00:44:44**

**AI:** Thank you very much. I would just welcome everybody—come into Tom's Bar-B-Q and taste some of this Mediterranean spice that we have on our barbecue.

**00:44:52**

**RF:** All right; well great. Thank you.

**00:44:55**

**[End Adam Itayem-Tom's Interview]**