

SAM NAKOS
Demetri's BBQ – Birmingham, AL

* * *

Date: December 30, 2004
Location: Demetri's BBQ – Birmingham, AL
Interviewer: Jake York
Length: 37 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

[Begin Sam Nakos]

00:00:00

Sam Nakos: Straight shooter.

00:00:11

Jake York: Yeah; I just want to explain again I don't know how much you know about the Southern Foodways Alliance. We're an organization based at the University of Mississippi.

00:00:18

SN: Okay.

00:00:20

JY: And basically our stated purpose is to research, record, and—and preserve and perpetuate the foodways of the South.

00:00:28

SN: Okay.

00:00:30

JY: And we've got—we've got a project going on to gather stories of Birmingham's Greek community and so that's one of the reasons I want to talk to you and also personally I'm interested in barbecue and anyway this basically is your consent to be recorded and—.

00:00:48

SN: Thank you sir; that's all I want.

00:00:51

JY: And just understand that what happens with the interview is that it maybe used on Southern Foodways' website and it will go in a permanent collection at the University of Mississippi.

00:01:03

SN: Okay; do you want me to sign here?

00:01:05

JY: Yeah; sign right there and just print your name underneath it.

00:01:23

SN: Address?

00:01:25

JY: Yep. I've got your telephone and all that stuff.

00:01:44

SN: You don't need my email?

00:01:47

JY: Thanks a lot.

00:01:48

SN: Thank you, sir. All right; I'm all yours.

00:01:53

JY: So you've been running this—Demetri's for how long?

00:01:58

SN: Well I started off in 1980 as a—right out of high school pretty much and my dad owned this restaurant, so I came over here and worked for him.

00:02:11

JY: Your father was Demetri?

00:02:12

SN: My father was Demetri and he started it here in '72 but he goes back to 1961 at El Rancho. He—he came over from Greece to this country and did some jobs and—but he had an uncle in the beer business and my Uncle Sam—or his Uncle Sam which was—we still call him Uncle Sam, but he owned some property here in Birmingham and he also owned a—a barbecue place called Oakland Barbecue. It was in—okay it was in—it's in—where is it—in Ensley. I don't know; I know it's—I don't think it's still there but anyway—so dad worked there just as—kind of just to make some money and it was a barbecue and a beer joint.

00:02:59

JY: Okay; and this was shortly after he came to America?

00:03:01

SN: Right after he came to America; so that was probably in the '50s—'55.

00:03:05

JY: And was it family over here that drew him?

00:03:06

SN: Yeah, yeah. Dad came over because a couple of his uncles came over and made some money and went back and one of them came over and made some money and stayed. But the one that came—stayed really was very successful. He had a beer distributorship and he was a very good salesman and made Pabst and Sterling very popular beers here in the mid-‘60s. So dad decided that he really wanted to do his own thing; he didn’t want to get involved with the nepotism, wanted to prove himself kind of like my uncle did you know—show them what he’s made of and he wanted to go out in his own business. So he started off working at the Oakland Barbecue and got a good taste for the bar business and restaurant business—and barbecue.

00:03:45

JY: And your Uncle Sam—?

00:03:48

SN: Owned that piece of property; he just—he was the landlord.

00:03:50

JY: Did he start that barbecue?

00:03:52

SN: No, he didn’t. He was only just the landlord of the restaurant—of—you know he was strictly—my Uncle Sam never got in the—in the restaurant business. He was just strictly beer warehousing.

00:04:02

JY: So your father learned—he learned to cook barbecue at Oakland?

00:04:05

SN: Yeah; I think he did, yeah. He just learned to cook it. Dad never talked much about those days; they were before I was born but he told us—the bad taste in his mouth was staying open ‘til 1:00 and a lot of steelworkers over there and I think he just didn’t—that wasn’t—wasn’t very conducive to our family so he just wanted a restaurant barbecue and probably to this day that’s why we don’t serve beer. I think he just got—got burned out on it. **[Laughs]**

00:04:33

JY: So he moved—did he move over here to Homewood then?

00:04:37

SN: Yeah; he came to—what he did is he came to—he got with a partner and he opened El Rancho was behind here. I don’t think—I’m not sure if it existed as a barbecue place first or not; I don’t remember. That was about when I was born. And then he decided—he was the brains and the recipe guy behind the whole thing. So he was very successful—

00:05:05

JY: And the other guy was more like a financial backer or something like that?

00:05:07

SN: Yeah; I think so and he was—but—but here's the thing—the funny thing about El Rancho; it was on Main Street—18th Street was Main Street back—way back in the '60s. There was no Red Mountain Expressway; you came from the south of town and you looped around and came right into El Rancho and went to the curb in Homewood. I don't know if anybody listens or reads about this—is familiar with the curb—then you took a right—[aside to waitress: that's exactly what I wanted]—took a right and headed up 20th Street over Vulcan into town; that was the only way in there. So that was his—it was a landmark little restaurant—a little joint.

00:05:42

JY: So you got the traffic coming into town?

00:05:43

SN: Everybody—everybody came through there and you know if you wanted to go to the football game from Mountain Brook or any area like that you came around. So anyway '72 rolls around and dad and the fire chief up here in Homewood, kind of like—he's an Andy Griffith-type character and this was like a Mayberry town back then—they were best friends because dad's restaurant, the El Rancho was next door to City Hall. So now all the firemen and all the policemen would come in and it's a joint—barbecue joint—drinking coffee and get to be friends and you know. So dad and—and Captain—Al Evans was his name—he became Chief later on—became best friends, so Al built this place. He was a builder on the side; so he built this restaurant.

00:06:29

JY: This particular building, right?

00:06:29

SN: This building and he also built my dad's house, so in '72 dad broke away and came over here and renamed his restaurant Demetri's and that was his first name and started on his own. So that's the beginning.

00:06:47

JY: So he split away from his partner at El Rancho?

00:06:47

SN: Yeah; he just—just left him.

00:06:48

JY: And El Rancho closed about that time or shortly thereafter?

00:06:52

SN: I think his partner bailed and dad sold the business to another person that still kept it as El Rancho but then they finally went out of business.

00:07:01

JY: Do you know why they called that first one El Rancho?

00:07:04

SN: Well it's a place called El Rancho somewhere in Texas I think or something. I don't know what they—where they got that.

00:07:13

JY: And the style of barbecue they served, was it like you have here?

00:07:16

SN: The same thing; it's the same recipe. Dad—dad got a sauce recipe from my mother's—I guess it's her—my mother's aunt's husband.

00:07:32

JY: Was she also Greek or no?

00:07:32

SN: She was Greek, born in Chicago.

00:07:34

JY: Okay.

00:07:35

SN: Not a food person—he had—he had a basic sauce recipe and dad got it and it was a real good recipe and dad just kind of improved on it, so that was the same recipe we used over there—we use over here.

00:07:51

JY: Okay; excellent is there a Greek influence in that?

00:07:55

SN: In the sauce no, but my dad—this is the funny thing about it. My dad—I'll just say upfront he always made the best spaghetti sauce, so my dad was a very good—he had a great palate. He just had a good cooking ability—the best cook I knew, which not necessarily—not necessarily true with all restaurant people; they may be good businesspeople or they you know—good promoters but dad was a great cook, so he—I think he—he did a great job with the sauce and many other recipes. We have a lot of things we're—that are unique here.

00:08:33

JY: And the cooking of the meat was that something that—sort of a Greek skill or did he learn something about it working in that Oakland barbecue stand [which was called Oakland Barbecue Stand]?

00:08:41

SN: Greeks barbecue lamb in Greece just like in the *Big Fat Greek Wedding* you see them rotating the lamb, so barbecue is not unusual in Greece because they cook over open—open charcoal or open wood but here it's a hickory flavored smoke thing, which is not particularly true in Greece. You're never going to find a restaurant in Greece that has smoked meat, you know. It's not part of their traditional cuisine. So dad—dad learned the smoke process I guess at Oakland and carried it through but—.

00:09:27

JY: Is this pit set up here—is that his own design and does it in any way resemble do you think what he—what he would have worked on in Oakland?

00:09:34

SN: The pit—yeah; I think it did. I think it was a basic open pit; that is the famous open pit. Now and we've had that basic kind of pit at Oakland since the '50s and so now—and of course Chief Evans built it. His firemen came down here; they're bricklayers and so they built it and we've rebuilt that pit a bunch of times and the firemen have always come down here to rebuild it except for a couple times when I had to hire other guys but—.

00:10:03

JY: Had to rebuild it because—?

00:10:05

SN: We rebuilt it.

00:10:04

JY: Because you needed more capacity or—?

00:10:05

SN: Well no it just breaks—it cracks up; yeah the heat and then sometimes you spray water on it and the bricks expand and contract and you can see that pit is falling apart; it's about to cave in. But—see all the cracks in it?

00:10:23

JY: Yeah; well what cuts—what cuts of pork are you—are you smoking here?

00:10:26

SN: We used to use shoulders and I think everybody used—

00:10:29

JY: The full shoulder or—?

00:10:29

SN: Uh-hmm, the full shoulder down but now everybody uses butts. They're easier to manage, easier to flip and probably as cheap and less hassle, I think. Although I think there's a couple of restaurants still using shoulders, but I don't think it matters on that. Usually the butt is where you get your—most of the meat from but—.

00:10:55

JY: Excellent; and so you said you started here right out of high school? Have you—had you been working here a lot when you were younger?

00:11:01

SN: My dad called me up when I was eight years old when his dishwasher didn't show up. My mother would bring me down here. I'd be crying the whole way but I—I came; I was one of three boys and I was the only guy that would come. My big brother came a little bit, but I was the one who always showed up. And there—thus my destiny for the rest of my life, you know was revealed.

00:11:27

JY: So did you start learning to cook—?

00:11:29

SN: I still watched cartoons, though.

00:11:31

JY: Really—even now?

00:11:32

SN: Yeah; of course—*[Laughs]*. It's very important.

00:11:36

JY: Were you learning to cook at that time or you just started out as kitchen help?

00:11:39

SN: No; I was the dishwasher—just bussed tables and just—.

00:11:40

JY: When did you start that?

00:11:42

SN: Now, cooking—When—when I was—came in and I guess I was 19 when I finally clocked in and never went back to college—I would—I would make pies when they went on—when anybody went on vacation I would have to do their station. I'd make the pies and then when the meat cutter went on vacation for two or three weeks I cut meat. And if anybody was sick I cooked, so I learned how to do—I learned how to do all that. You know after all this—all those years you learn how to flip the ribs and you start to get a feel for it. A lot of it's feel.

00:12:20

JY: Right.

00:12:21

SN: And then my dad was a great cook. Well me and my dad would cook things together back here and you know just in cooking these things, the items that we have on the menu now I learned how my dad cooked. But then sort of got interested in cooking pasta you know and asking my dad how he does things you know and he explained a lot of cooking technique to me, so—.

00:12:47

JY: Things that you sort of didn't serve here.

00:12:50

SN: No; not that—I expanded it further. I—I love to cook. I cook—I cook a lot of things, cook a lot of Italian dishes you know and I—the greatest thing about just saying that I mean you can go back there and cook. [*Interruption: Hey guy, how are you? Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you my friend; it's good to see you.*] The greatest thing is I can go back here and have almost everything—we have eggs, flour, butter, you know it's all available here and I can make a mess and somebody cleans it up and I can just experiment over a—with—with all the kitchen equipment we have here and that's something people just don't do at home. They don't want to mess up you know; so I did it all the time. I'd do it every afternoon if I could—pasta and so I really practiced.

00:13:36

JY: That's great. What have you added to the menu that your father didn't—?

00:13:40

SN: Okay; that's a great question 'cause we really didn't have much competition back in the earlier years.

00:13:49

JY: And you mean in this particular part of town or do you mean Birmingham total?

00:13:52

SN: In Birmingham; there was—I don't know if you remember when you were here last time I told you the—the three restaurants here in town were El Rancho and Demetri's, Golden Rule in Irondale and I think maybe this Golden Rule up here—I'm not sure when they made that and Ollie's. So it's basically Golden Rule, Ollie's and Demetri's—that was it but we kind of owned this area of town. If you want to go to Ollie's you're going to—. [*Interruption: Hey it's good to see you. Yes, I am.*] So if you wanted—if you wanted to eat down there you'd go down there; Golden Rule is in Irondale so we—you know we all had our territory and we had plenty of—didn't have as much competition. Now there's so many people that have opened up barbecue places and I think a lot of it—and I think everybody that's come through here to watch what we've done. Now they don't because there's so many other barbecue places, but we were kind of a—I guess a—I guess it's kind of a signature restaurant for barbecue but what have I added to the menu? This is pretty interesting 'cause my dad when he first started he had such a limited menu. He had barbecued pork and barbecued beef, fried peach, fried apple pies, French fries, and salad. And I have an old menu—I wish I could show you.

00:15:23

JY: The pork is the shoulder and the beef—was this brisket?

00:15:26

SN: No; we never cooked brisket in Birmingham. We just got like a top round and just made basically beef.

00:15:32

JY: Served that like on sandwiches, on plates or—?

00:15:35

SN: We just—kind of a replacement for pork if they didn't want pork; I don't know. We don't serve that much of it but I think we—I think we had ribs too. We did have ribs.

00:15:45

JY: Okay; pork ribs?

00:15:45

SN: Pork ribs—spare ribs, not even baby back—just regular spare ribs; so then we had a full breakfast but we had plates you know—we're using those items and we—I think we had a hamburger and a chili and then we sold everything by the pound so it was kind of real simple. Now I expanded with chicken—half chickens, quarter chickens, grilled chicken sandwiches we sell a ton of; we have turkey—.

00:16:18

JY: These are Greek chickens you're talking about?

00:16:20

SN: No; the regular barbecued quarter chickens smoked. Then I expanded all the dressings and then we expanded to baked beans, which we didn't have baked beans. We added potato salad and we added slaw at some point; my dad and I added that. And then we redid all the dressings and so then we—we started loading you know Greek salads, grilled chicken salads like what I'm eating now but—and—.

00:16:52

JY: Those are recipes your father—that your father taught you?

00:16:54

SN: No; the beans I came up with myself; the grilled chicken I came up with myself; then we created a marinade—pretty much came up with that—potato salad, all the dressings recipes, then we added pies. We had—dad added the lemon pie; we used to buy a lemon pie from another restaurant and finally we—we talked them into giving us the recipe and so we started making that lemon—got famous for that lemon pie recipe and then I added coconut and chocolate and—I'd have to look through the menu and see. We've added so many things. Oh I can tell you; we—I think we—we've improved our burgers. We've—I've added wings; we've added some combos which are combinations of everything but the other thing we've added a few things that were—well at breakfast we added omelets. We used to have a real simple breakfast—eggs, couple of eggs you know the way you want them and then we added—I added French toast and—.

00:18:07

JY: The things that you added, did people ask for these things or—?

00:18:10

SN: I think we just kind of realized we—I think we wanted to expand our menu. We saw the competition you know on the horizon and we—we knew that they were—they were there and they had these items and we—we wanted to make sure we had them and made them better, so—.

00:18:27

JY: But competition do you mean people like Ollie's or these other restaurants that are coming in?

00:18:31

SN: The newer restaurants like Johnny Ray's and Jim & Nick's, some of those newer ones.

00:18:37

JY: Right; okay and do y'all have a relationship with the other restaurateurs in—in Birmingham or are you kind of mostly on your own?

00:18:45

SN: We know all the Greek restaurants and of course we didn't have a relationship with the other barbecue—three guys because there is a competitive—too much competition. Greeks are very competitive.

00:18:57

JY: Right.

00:18:56

SN: Not like you know—so but we know some other Greek restaurant owners, but—. It's hard to capsule all these years in a few sentences but we work pretty hard over here.

00:19:19

JY: And I mean do you—I mean it seems like a lot of I mean at least from my very limited perspective, a lot of the very visible Greeks in—in Birmingham are involved in the restaurant industry in one way or another.

00:19:34

SN: They are.

00:19:36

JY: What's to account for that? I mean is there a certain Greek temperament, is it a Greek joy in food or is that just the opportunity where—?

00:19:45

SN: That's a good question. That's a good question. I think I would answer it instead of tip-toeing around the subject I think I would just answer it as honestly as I can and but in Greece they know good food. Good food is everywhere in Greece and Greeks are known for a specific traditional cuisine or—or traditional food and they eat it all the time and they know how to cook it. Everybody knows how to cook spaghetti in Greece; come to America and they call out for it or they go to restaurants and eat it. Americans don't have their own identity on food, so here they are tapping onto all these thousands and thousands of years of culture like Chinese, Greek, Italian; they've been doing these things for thousands and thousands of years you know. So I think God gave Greeks a palate and I think he also gave them a very, very hard work ethic and

these guys from other countries when they come over to America and they see opportunities they—they snag it and they're dedicated. And I think—I think Americans lack the know-how on how to cook, you know what I mean in—in general—in general. I'm not trying to be critical. I know somebody is going to read this or—or maybe say well my aunt—my grandmother cooks—you know; I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about a whole culture that's enriched with recipes just like the Italians. They come over and they know how to cook.

00:21:22

JY: Now some people would say that about southerners that southerners compared to other Americans you know have a strong feeling of tradition.

00:21:28

SN: I think that's true too, but the thing is about the Greeks, the work ethic in this—when you get in the restaurant business it's—it's a—it's like being in a boxing ring. I mean it's—it's serious. And Greeks are willing to do it. They don't—they're high strung and they have tons of energy and they're willing to put up with all the other things that go along with the restaurant business and survive in it because they're dedicated; they will not—they don't—they don't get defeated very easily.

00:22:00

JY: When I started that question I was wondering if your father felt—or if you feel that the southern you know interests in—in good eating sort of made this a perfect place for—for you to have a restaurant?

00:22:16

SN: Yeah.

00:22:16

JY: You're going to find a lot of people who are really going to enjoy it—not just Greeks, but you know a lot of other types of people. You've got to enjoy eating it.

00:22:27

SN: I think—I think Birmingham has been great to us; it's a great place to have a restaurant and a great place to live and also people are very receptive and they've been very receptive to our food. They like it. And it's—I feel like we've helped shape—I think Demetri's has; I don't—I don't necessarily—I think maybe Golden Rule could say that and Ollie's could say that but I don't believe anybody else could really say that—we've helped shape and define barbecue for the whole South 'cause I feel like Birmingham is a very strong—strong area for barbecue. I really think we could go to Memphis and show those boys what—how to do it but you know they have a big national recognition and reputation but they don't have anything on Birmingham. But and I think we've defined it; we've helped define it right here.

00:23:19

JY: Just in terms of quality or do you think you've had influence over it like particular types of dishes that people like, particular cuts, flavor of sauce—?

00:23:26

SN: I think both; I think we—you know you get a few restaurants in the town and they get successful they start—people start emulating them and I think that's what people have done is

just emulated these restaurants and maybe got a better location and maybe expanded the menu and you know took it to the next level some way, somehow but they didn't define it.

00:23:53

JY: Have any of the people who worked here for you or for your father in the past gone on to open up barbecue restaurants?

00:23:57

SN: That's a good question. My dad—my dad had a Greek guy come over from Greece and helped him open up a restaurant called Rigas Bar-B-Q which was—do you remember that?

00:24:08

JY: I did this—I did a project looking at all the barbecue restaurants from way back.

00:24:11

SN: You saw it?

00:24:12

JY: And so I've seen pictures of it and I've seen the records of it but I never went there.

00:24:16

SN: What's funny is he opened it up in Homewood about 10 miles from here and my dad never said a word about it. He taught him how to cook here and he opened up a restaurant and he made some money and he did good. He had a partner named Costa, which was Gus—I'm pretty sure they were partners; I saw them down there.

00:24:39

JY: They still have the—the barbecue restaurant—Costa's.

00:24:42

SN: Costa's, yeah; so my dad taught Rigas. Rigas probably taught—I don't know if Costa learned from Rigas and I think a couple of restaurants came out of that, so—so that's why I'm saying we go back to where I don't know; it's just you know—people who are—I don't know what these guys were doing before they were making barbecue but they weren't in the restaurant business you know 20 years ago some of them weren't. I remember in '80 that I think they started to open up restaurants around here in '80—a couple of the barbecues but they were selling insurance or whatever they were doing; I don't know. But you know dad has been doing it so long and when my dad passed away in Greece, by the way, two and a half years ago but he—.

00:25:30

JY: He retired to Greece?

00:25:32

SN: Well he went over there. We used to go over there every year for three weeks and visit his friends and family and come back but he was over there and he was eating dinner with his best friends and just you know passed away. But he—he—he had another group of friends over there and then a whole other life and he—he enjoyed that; so—.

00:25:55

JY: Now are there things that are—are changing that makes it more difficult for you to continue doing what you're doing?

00:26:01

SN: Uh-hm.

00:26:01

JY: I mean I don't know how easy or difficult it is to get wood, you know if you're running your fire entirely on wood and things like that. Several other people I've talked to you know say that the—the pig is changing.

00:26:12

SN: Oh really?

00:26:13

JY: The pig is different.

00:26:14

SN: Really?

00:26:15

JY: From you know decade to decade.

00:26:18

SN: I remember pork tasting a lot better.

00:26:21

JY: Really?

00:26:21

SN: I do.

00:26:23

JY: Just being more flavorful or—?

00:26:23

SN: I do; maybe it—maybe it—flavor, I just remember it—maybe it's because I was a kid, you know. And it was just—just tasting it for the first time; it still tastes good but I just—it could be possible that they have—they used to feed them all corn back then and now they feed them different things but I can't really—I can't really tell you scientifically if I think something has changed. It could be me; it could be my taste buds, but I do remember pork being—it seems like it was more flavorful and different—a little bit different.

00:27:05

JY: Right; did it cook differently do you remember?

00:27:06

SN: Now you would think the stuff would fall apart a little bit more but I can't really say—. I just remember it tasting, it was more—it had more flavor but like I said you know I'm sure—that could be—that could be just theory; so—.

00:27:27

JY: You don't have any troubles keeping a wood supply?

00:27:29

SN: No; I don't. I mean you—we have to pay more money for it. I just you know I pay a lot more money for it; it's going up.

00:27:35

JY: And do you use hickory exclusively?

00:27:37

SN: Hickory; uh-huh.

00:27:38

JY: And that's your whole fire is hickory?

00:27:40

SN: Hundred percent hickory and no coals.

00:27:43

JY: All right.

00:27:44

SN: But it's more expensive now but no problem.

00:27:51

JY: You said you are the only one of your brothers and sisters—or do you have any sisters?

00:27:55

SN: No; just two brothers; uh-hmm.

00:27:57

JY: You're the only one who came to work here? They're not in the restaurant business at all?

00:28:01

SN: They're not but they eat here. One of them eats here all the time for free. *[Laughs]*

00:28:08

JY: Now do you—do you have children that you're going—?

00:28:11

SN: Nope—never got married.

00:28:11

JY: Never got married?

00:28:12

SN: Uh-um.

00:28:13

JY: Do you look to pass this on to somebody?

00:28:15

SN: Not really; I worked so hard for 22 years I've—I finally came to the conclusion I'd never want my kids to do this but I'm starting to go into a new phase. I'm starting to really like it. I think I'm getting—I think I'm getting better at doing what I did but I think it took—it took me—it took me a long time to figure out repeating some of the same mistakes—20 years. So I think if I had a kid now—I joke with my brother—my brother I—I think—he has a little four year-old, my little four year-old niece I think I would—I would put her on the counter sitting up there handing out toothpicks every day you know. I think that's—that's where I would start my kid off but—and I definitely would do it but at this point you know I've come so far without it. But this—this business can really God man—it can really—I think it cuts into family life. I don't know what the divorce—divorce percentage is with—with restaurant and restaurant managers but it has to be high.

00:29:21

JY: Yeah because you spend so much of your time here.

00:29:23

SN: Worries, talk about it after work, phone calls—.

00:29:27

JY: You're here every day right? Are you—do you—?

00:29:30

SN: Every day but—every day but I started taking—I worked six days a week and we're open six days a week, worked every day for 21—22 years. And that's one of the secrets I found; personally I think you need to work five days and you—everybody needs two days off; that's

why I started giving all my employees two days off—most all of them—that wanted it and I only work five days a week now. And when I'm here I don't feel like I'm as much a slave to it.

00:30:02

JY: Right.

00:30:03

SN: I like my job more.

00:30:03

JY: You were always closed Sundays?

SN: Closed Sundays.

JY: You were never open on Sundays?

00:30:04

SN: Yeah; uh-hmm.

00:30:08

JY: Have you ever had any pressure from anybody or—?

00:30:10

SN: To open Sunday?

00:30:12

JY: As to why you're not open on Sundays?

00:30:14

SN: I've heard some people ask us but we just you know—just looking back it's a pretty simple answer. You could have never gone to church with your family; you know dad could have never gone to church with us. We would be down here seven days a week instead of six; it would be no way to survive. You have to have a day off unless you have—you know for us. And if I had brothers or something like that but still man it's just good to have one day—shut it down.

00:30:41

JY: And do you mostly tend the pit here or do you have a couple of pit men?

00:30:44

SN: I've got a pit guy, a Greek man.

00:30:46

JY: Is he—a Greek man all right.

00:30:48

SN: Yeah; barely speaks English—not at all.

00:30:52

JY: And he's been with you for a while?

00:30:52

SN: I've always had a Greek guy on the pit.

00:30:55

JY: That's interesting.

00:30:57

SN: He's 10 years with me. I teach—I teach them all—I teach all my cooks how to cook and then hopefully I can get out—.

00:31:05

JY: Right; get your day off that way?

00:31:08

SN: I don't want to stay back there too long. I end up back there a lot though. I found somebody that can out-cook me; it's that Mexican guy I have back there. I finally found somebody.

[Laughs]

00:31:24

JY: So do you—I mean do you feel like there are distinctive things here though that you would—like if you weren't able to—that Birmingham would lose something?

00:31:31

SN: I think so.

00:31:31

JY: Really particular?

00:31:33

SN: I think so; I really do. I feel that way because you know you don't know what you have 'til it's gone and I really think that Demetri's—I think people would say you know you know Demetri's isn't there anymore but it—dah-dah-dah. You know how—there's some things here that we do that other people don't do. Fried pies for instance—those things are like—we always have people say those fried pies are what my grandmother makes. Nobody makes them but—so we're the—I think another restaurant in town makes them but they're not—they don't make them like we do. So but turnovers—we hand-make ours—roll it out, cut it, and I've got a Mexican guy back there—he puts it in his hand like a taco and he puts the filling in it and he hand-makes—.

00:32:22

JY: Squeezes it together?

00:32:22

SN: Squeezes it together and then he—then he forks it, so you know—.

00:32:29

JY: Great; that way I guess you know you're making a quality product all the time.

00:32:32

SN: Yes. We just never automated that. You know and it's hard to automate it. It's dough, it's baking—baking is kind of hard to automate but I don't know—maybe you know I don't say the world would never be the same or anything like that; you know what I mean. But I think—

00:32:55

JY: I would assume you have some regulars who come in here.

00:32:57

SN: Oh God; you should hang around here all day.

00:32:58

JY: Okay.

00:33:03

SN: You ought to sit where you're sitting right now and in the morning the coffee club, but you just don't understand how many—and mostly breakfast. You don't know how many people I've seen through here—come in here every single day and drink coffee. The people that I've met and the people that have passed away. It's so scary. You see people—I mean they come in here every day of their lives and they will today or they will you know—they did this morning and they will this afternoon like in about an hour or two I have a couple. [*Interruption: Exchange between Sam and a customer in Greek.*] He says he has cholesterol. [*Interruption: Hey.*] That's what he's trying to say. So yeah I mean we have had so many regulars and up at the bar just the older guys that would come in and sit up there every day. We had a plaque up there; we had a Henry Ortt plaque right there. It fell off—

00:34:29

JY: The guy that used to sit right there?

00:34:31

SN: Every day—he reminded me of George Washington you know with short hair. He just was the salt of the earth but—. I got memories of so many people that come in and out of here.

[Interruption: *I'm in an interview. Look, I'm doing an interview.*]

00:35:01

JY: Well we can wrap this up. This has been a great conversation.

00:35:04

SN: What do you think? Do I—did we get everything in there?

00:35:08

JY: I think so; this is great stuff. I mean that does seem pretty much it you know and the only other thing I would ask is to see you know what your sense is of the way the Birmingham barbecue scene has changed you know in your—in the time that you've been working here and where you see it going or where you see—I mean I don't know; it could be considered a competition or—?

00:35:37

SN: Hmm; I'm not a real—I just feel funny about competing against people. You know we've been here 40 years. **[Interruption: *Happy New Year to you.*]** What's your first name?

00:35:52

JY: Jake.

00:35:55

SN: Jake in all honesty we've been here 40 years and we've never won one single contest—nothing, nothing, and I go see—I see banners in front of people's restaurant like Golden Rule down in Calera—voted so and so number—Birmingham's best barbecue and I go in. And I went in there to eat one day and I mean I was like amazed. So you know if that's what a competition is all about I don't think I want to enter anyway; I don't care. I just want to win the hearts of my loyal customers over and that's it. I don't like—and I don't need anybody to judge me 'cause I already know. I feel very confident about my food. So I don't care about that; now where is barbecue changed—how is it changing in Birmingham? The only thing that—that has happened—is changed is there's been a lot of people open and the—the standards are high because they're going to have to compete with me and some of the other guys who do pretty good barbecue and we're—I'm not lowering my standards, so they're going to have to raise theirs and that's what happened. They have to raise theirs a little bit but still people—so I don't see—I don't see—I see more barbecue places may be opening up; there's a lot of them. There is a ton of them that have opened up in the last 15 years, but you know—. I don't know about anything dramatically huge changing. I know we're getting more popular because there's a big development going across the street. We're going to be even more of a landmark I think.

00:37:32

JY: So you're going to stick right here and smoke them out?

00:37:34

SN: I'm sticking right here and going to smoke them out.

[End Sam Nakos]