

## THE FISH MARKET

611 21<sup>st</sup> Street South  
Birmingham, AL 35233  
(205) 322-3330  
[www.birminghammenus.com/thefishmarket](http://www.birminghammenus.com/thefishmarket)

*"The only thing I always ha[d] a hard time [with in] southern cooking, one product: corn. We never use corn in our cooking, at least in—where I come from. And we always thought corn, it was for the animals only. And I [didn't] eat cornbread for the last fifteen—the first fifteen years I was in the United States. And actually, I like it."*

**--George Sarris**

George Sarris came to Birmingham from Greece in 1969. After a few years of working in restaurants owned by relatives and fellow countrymen (Niki's West and John's included), he partnered with his uncle in The Fish Market Restaurant on South 21<sup>st</sup> Street downtown. In 1982 he bought the business from his uncle and has since become a veritable ambassador of Greek food and culture. In addition to running the restaurant, George has an import company that deals in Greek products from his native Tsitalia. But with everything from fried green tomatoes to baklava on the restaurant's menu, it's apparent that his place is as Southern as it is Greek. His father, Kostandinos Sarris, has retired from his days running Sarris's Hot Dogs and can often be found visiting with friends at his son's place. The joint is always bustling with an eclectic crowd, so plan to stay a while to take it all in. And make sure to check out all of the fantastic photographs hanging throughout the restaurant that beautifully document George's many visits back to his hometown.

---

### Full Interview Transcription:

George Sarris, Owner  
THE FISH MARKET  
611 21<sup>st</sup> Street South  
Birmingham, AL 35233  
(205) 322-3330  
[www.birminghammenus.com/thefishmarket](http://www.birminghammenus.com/thefishmarket)

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans  
DATE: March 8, 2004 @ 1:30 p.m.  
LOCATION: Mr. Sarris's office  
LENGTH: Approx. 45 minutes

**NOTE:** Mr. Sarris can be heard shelling pistachios throughout the interview. He never eats them; he just shells them. His office, while private, is adjacent to the ordering counter in the restaurant. There are a few subtle instances in

the interview, when the staff can be heard taking orders or using the cash register.

\* \* \*

Amy Evans: Okay, this is Monday, March eighth, two thousand and four. And I'm in Birmingham, Alabama, at The Fish Market Restaurant with George Sarris. And he's the owner and proprietor here. We're in his office. Mr. Sarris, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and age—

George Sarris: My age too!

AE: --if you'd be so kind. [Laughs]

GS: [Laughs] Okay, my name is George Sarris, and I'm fifty-two years old.

AE: And you arrived from Greece to Birmingham in nineteen sixty-nine?

GS: Nineteen sixty-nine. April the first.

AE: And what brought you to Birmingham?

GS: Eh, uh, [short pause] from the village where we come from--

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: --in Greece. Uh, in nineteen hundred there was probably about four hundred fifty families. Uh, which is that three hundred fifty immigrate to Birmingham—through the times. And it was—I always have some relatives here. Uh, kind of—that's how we started. [Sniffs] And it was the option—it was to go to Germany—because we was very poor. My parents both, they were subsis—subsistence farmers.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And we—we have the option to go to Germany or to go to Australia. And we decided to come to United States. It would—because there was more people from our village here.

AE: Okay. And who were the other people before you from your village who came?

GS: I mean, well—great grandparents and, eh, uh, uncles and—I mean, mostly mens. They used to come, work for ten, fifteen years and then come back, build their house and—yeah. Eh, some of them—I—I have one uncle, which he is, uh, my grandmothers brother. He was here--five children, his wife pregnant, he came to United States, and he never came back to Greece

until his son--which his wife she was pregnant--he was thirty-six years old. Now that's a—I mean, really.

AE: My goodness.

GS: Yeah, you see, back then---the transportation—I mean it was hard for them to go back and—

AE: Sure.

GS: And, uh, uh, I was at, uh, website of Ellis Island.

AE: I visited there yesterday. You can get the—

GS: Yeah, yeah.

AE: --transportation records.

GS: You see in, eh, what ship they come and—

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And lot of people from my village--that's what I was looking for—for my grandfather. And I—everybody who was going to this particular street. Twenty-sixth Street and it was this particular address, which is no exist now, but it was a—a small Greek restaurant and—because I don't know anybody else address, they knew this one, and everybody can look for the address.

AE: Huh.

GS: Yeah, and early—early nineteen hundreds.

AE: Well, you mentioned before we started—you mentioned your great grandfather—

GS: Yeah. Great grandfather. He was the first time here. He was born in 1864. His name, it was Triantaffillos Balabanos. He was here in Birmingham—the first time—1887. And he was come here, work three, four years, then he go back, and he use the money for dowry [sound of bell ringing in background] to marry his daughters.

AE: What kind of work did he do when he came here?

GS: Eh, in a restaurants. He was in restaurants. In fact, he was in a—a—he was doing something has to do with fish. Because I—like I was saying earlier, he used to tell me—he was a blind—eh, all my lifetime—I was born in 1951, close to fifty-two—and, uh, he born six, six. He died six, six, sixty-six. Anyway, he was telling me about oysters. And I remember [phone rings] he

was telling me how to open. He was blind, but he knew all the movements-- how you open the oyster without leave a shell inside there. You know, that way when the customer eat it, you don't have no shell in it. And you know, to me it was kind [short pause] really, it--it was like a fairy tale. Because I mean, I would not believe those things. That inside a rock you open and eat it. Uh, we live—we live very close to the ocean, but we live in the mountains. And, uh, the first time we—even myself, I got in a—I got in a car, I was sixteen. I mean, you know, that way you see how—and I remember he was tell us about beef and, uh, I don't—I never taste beef until we come to the United States.

AE: So how is it do you think that Greeks came to Birmingham and got into the restaurant business? Because it's just ag—

GS: Uh—

AE: --the agriculture background or—

GS: They—I think so because the—the first Greeks from Greece, eh, they say they came to the South to work in the railroad—for--lay the railroad tracks?

AE: uh-huh.

GS: And they find out, really, how many was too much work, and they find out if you open a fruit stand or some kind of food stand they—you know, it was easier work and all rewarding money-wise. And that's what they did. [Phone rings] That's where they started. I don't think so—to be honest with you, really, to me the surprise because none of them [the men] cook more or less there [in Greece]. But I mean, they knew about fresh ingredients and they knew, uh, a little bit about food. But, no. I mean—I know—I mean number one, most of them was so poor, they barely would have enough—I mean, you're talking about no food to eat. I mean at least what—where I come from it's subsistence farming. You raise everything you eat. I mean, you raise ten different kinds of beans or lentils of--of pistachio nuts and figs and grapes and wine and honey and—and we know lot of things about ingredients, very little thing about the actual cooking of the ingredients. The women, they mostly did. But the women, they would not leave though.

AE: So do you think most of it, um, might have to do with just kind of the momentum that's gained by having—

GS: Exactly!

AE: --your fellow countrymen here?

GS: Exactly. And just like any other nationality, the first one—the second, uh, boatload had come, per se. You know, they—they was going somewhere

to work, and they go to somebody who has a fruit stand or a restaurant or a coffee shop or something like that.

AE: A place where they know someone.

GS: And that's what, you know, and after—no—but, uh, uh, that's why the Italians stuck with the grocery stores, the Jewish immigrants they stuck with, eh, the dry goods stores. You know, clothing and things. I mean, what the first people did, we can follow up in kind of—in their steps. [Phone rings]

AE: Because I—the interview that I showed you earlier—

GS: Yeah.

AE: --that was from Greenwood [Mississippi], um, Mr. Ballas first and foremost is a businessman. And the fact that he owns a re—restaurant seems kind of secondary—

GS: It does.

AE: --to his being a businessman.

[There is a knock on Mr. Sarris's office door.]

AE: Um, and so I wonder [sound of door opening. Man looks in, sees us talking and quickly closes the door back.] If just the independence—the independent nature of the restaurant business and that sort of thing, If that also—

GS: You see, the people they left, the people we left—and I think we a lot more adventurers [phone rings]. I mean, we live a lot more independent. You know, really, I came here in 1969 and opened my first business in 1971. I mean actually, about a year-and-a-half after I was in United States.

AE: Well, and I read that you—did you come here and work for—at John's [Restaurant]?

GS: Yeah. Actually, I was a partner in John's.

AE: Okay.

GS: Yeah. And, uh, I mean it's just—that's what you do, really.

AE: Yeah.

GS: Now let me give you another side. My grandfather on my father's side, he go to the, uh, port to live and—with about ten other mens from the village. [Phone rings] And, uh, he saw some baby cry because his

father—you know what I mean—and he say, “No, I don’t want to leave my kids like that.” And he get up and go back to the village. He was a shepherd. I mean, you know, they just—just—you know, and the people, the left, yeah. I think they was independent. I think so. Now, the people from my village-- no, there was not a businessman. I think so—necessarily. But it was very independent—I mean, they always have a—you know, to leave your family, to leave your loved ones and go to some country [where] you don’t speak the language. You might or you might not find a job. Or a friend. Then--I mean, it was a big thing. You know.

AE: And so you’re from the town of T--

GS: Tsitalia.

AE: --Tsitalia.

GS: Tsitalia, which is a small village up in the mountains. I mean, the car—electricity—when I left, uh, in 1969, it was no electricity, no running water. And a dirt road. Now they have, uh, asphalt, and they have water a year ago. I mean look, 2003 they put the water. And they have electricity around 1973. [Phone ringing]

AE: And I understand that the Greek community in Birmingham that’s from that village has done a lot to support—

GS: Yeah, we support the village. But, uh, I kind of—we fix the school and give money for the church and, uh, you know, we—in fact, we try to raise money to upgrade the—what is the small kid’s place? What is that name? Playground.

AE: Okay.

GS: Playground. Yeah. It—

AE: And I know you make trips back. How often do you go?

GS: I used to go about five times a year. Then I married and then go down to four. And then my wife raise hell, it go down to a little less. [Laughs] No, we have a business there. We--we have a little import company we started as a [short pause] kind of more or less a way to go to Greece. And we bring olive oil, and we bring Greek urns and—you know really, it’s—it’s—and we take friends, and we take customers uh--

AE: I found on the Internet an essay where you, um, went to Greece with Frank Stitt from Highlands [Bar & Grill in Birmingham].

GS: Yes. He—he’s a—ah—really, he’s one of the best I ever saw. And yeah, and we picked the olive oil. I mean, we pick olives, we go to the olive

presses—eh, Greece is not the country which it was be in 1950. But still, uh—but, I mean, we go there, we go to the restaurants, we try to come back with some ideas. And when I first came to Birmingham, really, I mean, it was—I mean the whole South—the food in the whole South has evolved. I mean, look. Eighteen hundred fifty, I mean, everybody eat meat and potatoes, you know what I mean. More or less. And I mean, very limited. Eh, now we have unlimited amount of—of sources of the food. I own seafood company, and we can order, uh, salmon from Chile today, and it will be here tomorrow t—eight o'clock. If we order before two o'clock. We order, uh, uh, Sea Bass and [unintelligible phrase] from Cyprus, uh, today. And tomorrow night it's at airport in Birmingham. I mean, it's just, you know, different, different, different. Yeah.

AE: So tell me how you came to open the Fish Market. [Short pause] And when that was.

GS: Okay. It was 1983. Eh, actually, I w—my uncle opened it first. And after a few months he was tired, he can't—you know, he say, "Come over. Take it over." And it was—

AE: Who's your uncle?

GS: Jimmy Hontzas. The late Jimmy Hontzas. He was—have six seats. He was kind of more or less wholesale price. And then we turn it to the restaurant. [Short pause] And the restaurant is history, and we work too hard. Anyway. But I—I been to Birmingham all these years and—and I was reading a little bit about the other gentleman in Mississippi [Mike Ballas, owner of the Crystal Grill in Greenwood], and he's the same thing. I mean, you know. You see somebody's family and I [short pause] to me, I mean, I don't see as more or less as customers. I see the people as kind of family. After a while you—you see —I mean, you know, somebody bring their kids here in a —in a—in a, uh, you know, twenty days old. And you bring in, you hold in your hands and then you see them, they finished college and—you know what I mean. They—[The door to the office opens, Mr. Sarris's father peek in, they have a brief exchange in Greek, and he closes the door again behind him.] Yeah, that's my father. [Phone rings]

AE: It is!

GS: Yeah, that's my father. He don't speak much—much English.

AE: No?

GS: Yeah, he just come—you know. Uh, he used to have a sandwich shop.

AE: Okay. What is his name?

GS: Kostandinos Sarris [pronounces this *Sar-reese*]

AE: Okay.

GS: Yeah. Sarris, you know. Anyway, after a while becomes [short pause] family, friends, acquaintance, it's just like, uh—I mean that's what I like, personally, about the South. Which is very unusual in other parts of the country. It—after you stay—even as—as—place as big as Birmingham. I mean, it's just kind of family, you know what I mean. Really.

[There's another knock on the office door]

AE: Well, can you talk a little bit about how the restaurant's changed over the years since—

GS: The restaurant's—the [short pause] To--to start with, when I come here I remember, uh, because I work in a restaurant, of course, it was—having the menu it was very—steak. T-bone steak and Delmonico steak and, uh, chicken broiled Greek-style, and—and, uh, liver with onions. Now it's just—at least in Birmingham, I know, which I'm very familiar with it—it's unbelievable. [Phone rings] I mean we have a wholesale seafood house, and we have twelve different kind of shell oysters, for instance. [The fax machine can be heard dialing a number] I mean, we have four kinds of salmons, we have a Sea Bass, we have a [sound of fax being transmitted] [Knock on the office door. A man peeks in.]

GS: [To the interviewer] Do you mind?

AE: Not at all.

GS: Yeah, let me get this—[Mr. Sarris passes by me in the tiny office to get to the office door]

MAN: George—

GS: Yeah. Yeah, but I'm with somebody. I'm sorry.

MAN: All right.

GS: Yeah. [Now, to interviewer] I'm going it leave it locked—open like that.

AE: Okay.

GS: Yeah—I think so—okay, two things. I—I think so, the biggest change it was—I mean, it happened because people started to travel. A man or a family from here travel and become a lot more available--in late—early seventies—and a person go to San Francisco, go to new Orleans, go to overseas to Italy, to Greece, to, uh, Mexico, and they try something different. When they come back—and all these immigrants come open little

places, the people a lot more [short pause] eager to try the—those foods. But I think so, traveling to me, traveling open your horizons.

AE: So do you think that maybe you've added *more* Greek items to your menu over the years?

GS: You see, I mean [short pause] Uh, I mean, I always tell the joke when—on a—on a—on--who was a baby in Greece--in a milk bottle they used to put oregano. And sometimes, you know, we have—I mean, a show somewhere or something, you know I say that. And for five minutes I'm not correct myself. I just, you know, let it go. And then it's going to happen, somebody call or say, "Really, y'all put oregano?" I mean, you know, uh—I mean, silly. Of course you would not put oregano. [Another knock on the office door.] But what—Yes? [To the person at the door.]

[Short pause]

MAN: Hey, George.

GS: I—I cannot talk to you right now.

MAN: Huh?

GS: I cannot talk to you right now.

MAN: Okay.

GS: Come back in a little while, please.

MAN: Okay.

GS: [To interviewer] Okay, Eh, um. [Sound of door closing] Everybody looking for a job. You see, Bush is not doing as good as what he thinks. Anyway. Of course, you're from Texas, but I'm a Democrat. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] Well, just because I'm from Texas--

GS: If you don't like me for that, that's fine!

AE: [Laughing] I don't claim him, believe me.

GS: Yeah, yeah. Okay. What was—about the—

AE: About the Greek items on the menu. Because—

GS: Yeah, okay.

AE: --your menu is so extensive.

GS: Okay.

AE: You have—

GS: Yeah, I mean I would say we use oregano—I mean, yes [short pause] the red fish might be Louisiana original recipe, but then we Greek it—

AE: Yeah.

GS: --somewhat. I'm serious! It's funny [laughs] because—I mean, you know, we do some things back there, and I'll be damned. You put what you grew up with, you know? They say white wine, you put a little red wine. You put little less. That's what you used to cook there. Uh, I mean, you know, you—you put—you—they say [short pause] basil—because we don't use as much basil on some foods, and we use oregano. We use a lot of oregano. We use lot of garlic. Uh, yes, we—I mean, this way is—is impossible [short pause] not to put your culture in it, you know what I mean?

AE: Sure.

GS: I mean, you know, we here—sometimes we do catering. Somebody want to do a small omelet for early in the morning, and I always suggest Greek omelet. You know, with feta cheese, with chopped olives, a touch of green onion in it—but you see—I mean, it's—it's—uh, I think [short pause] people it—it—it's a lot more—you are Americanized on a somewhat—some level, but yet your culture is so strong, it's impossible to shed—to—to—to—it's impossible. I don't care what—I mean, it's totally impossible not to, uh, uh—I mean, and in—in subtle ways, really. Even—even back there. I mean, for instance we—somebody wants to—a toast here. I mean and—and they say, you know, "We want it toasted." We'll—after we toast it, we put a little Greek spices on it, which is consist of oregano, thyme, garlic, salt, black pepper.

AE: And this is on breakfast toast, you say?

GS: No, it's just on regular toast.

AE: Okay.

GS: Well, you know, we just sprinkle. You see, that's how [short pause] I mean, that's what it—And I guess, in the bottom line, that's what it's so nice about--different cultures, they bring-- You know what I mean?

AE: Sure.

GS: What they bring to this country. And to me, I mean, really it's very painful when you watch some people they say, you know, "We have too many Mexicans. We have too many this." You know, "Too many Africans. Too

many--" But you'd be surprised how much all these cultures—all these people that come arrange their lives with things, you know—you never—when I came here it was two Mexican restaurants. And both [of] them, they was not worth a damn, I promise you. Now we have a—I mean, some excellent Mexican restaurants in Birmingham. I mean, we have Vietnamese cuisine, which is totally different from Chinese food. I mean, unbelievable! I have five Vietnamese people work in the kitchen. I mean, you don't know how much they bring to the culture, you know, here in the South. And I think that the South overall, may be a lot of the—[Mr. Sarris turns around to look behind him]. I have—I don't have it with me. I don't have it here. But I collect, eh, I buy through eBay, nineteen hundred—early nineteen hundreds cookbooks. And I'm going to tell you—I mean, you can see only a wealthy family [sound of fax machine dialing]--only ten percent of the population would use the [sound of fax machine transmitting]—those ingredients for their cooking. Most people, they was basic. I mean, you make—I mean, you know, I have a—you know, how to make lard. I mean, you know. Now you have olive oil. We have olive oil, we have in—because I bring olive oil, we import from Tunisia. We have Tunisian olive oil. Right now in our wholesale, we have Greek olive oil, Tunisian olive oil, Turkish olive oil, Spanish, Portugal [short pause] and Morocco. [Short pause] And, as a chef, you can go in and make your own blend, you write it down and then we serve it. I mean, look how far we go.

AE: Yeah.

GS: I mean, I think, uh—uh—I mean—

AE: Well and how do you think that Southern cooking has influenced your restaurant here? With the frog legs and fried green tomatoes on the—

GS: It—eh—

AE: --menu.

GS: --the Southern, you know, really—I'm telling you. We take the Southern cooking and we Greek it a little bit.

AE: [Laughs]

GA: I mean, I'm serious. It's funny! But you know, it is, uh, uh—for instance, uh [short pause] You know, I find the Southern cooking somewhat similar [to] where we come from. Overcooked vegetables--I mean, the green beans still—you kill them to death. Greens and that, you know. You put ham in it and—eh, eh, you know. We put olive oil. We don't put a ham, you know. Uh, much ham. Uh, the only thing I always have a hard time to—about the southern cooking, one product: corn. We never use corn in our cooking, at least in—where I come from. And we always thought corn, it was for the animals only. And I don't eat cornbread for the last fifteen—the first fifteen

years I was in the United States. And actually, I *like* it. I make cornbread. I used to make it because I used to work in a cafeteria a little bit and, uh—I think so—we took, uh, Southern food—all the immigrants, you know, from Germany and the ones in the restaurant and [short pause] from Ireland, from Greece, from Italy—we took Southern food and it was just kind of, uh—Italianize it or Irelandize it or Greeksize it—whatever you c—whatever the proper word. You see? Because, how many truly—if a restaurant by immigrants or about—or about Italians, you know, with a strong Italian background, it's not truly Southern food if you—if—if you pay attention to it. I mean, some things they do—they cook roast beef, okay? How are they Southern cooking? Roast beef? With carrots, onions [short pause] you know, potatoes, maybe. Eh, now, the Italians, the Greeks come. We'll put celery; we put lots of garlic. The Italians put basil—little basil. [Phone rings] We—and, uh, white wine. *And* red wine. You know, even—and you cook that. And the Italians put a little more bell pepper; we put little less bell pepper. We put celery on just about everything. But you see, in the South [sound of someone sneezing]—and I worked in Niki's on Finley Avenue? [Niki's West]

AE: Niki's? Yeah.

GS: Yeah. And it was my uncle's—which—it was truly—I mean, it was not—no, you don't out celery. I mean, you know, the cooks there—which they was born here—the truly—I mean, personally [Announcement on intercom: George, line one] if I wanted—if I wanted [sound of intercom disconnecting] truly taste Southern food now, I go to a black family-owned restaurant. They've stuck more with the real Southern old cooking and, you know. But—[Mr. Sarris turns around to check the phone.] Let me—I'm going to put somebody--

AE: Sure.

GS: Hello? [Mr. Sarris speaks in Greek. The conversation only takes a moment, and then he's back to the interview] Yeah. [Short pause] Anyway [short pause] you see, I think so—all these other people that come here, they change the food habits of the Southern people. And South is not, eh, it's not what it used to be—South. [Sound of fax machine dialing out.] Now it's more mixed. I mean, you know [sound of fax machine transmitting] we have customers—I mean, we have customers for the—all the states. [Short pause] I mean, now is just so, uh—you know, with--especially Birmingham with the medical center or what—any even small towns now. You have small towns with a doctor from India. I mean, eh, they in—he invites some of his friends, and they cook with curry, or they cook—they use different Indian spices. Then, some people, they're a little more adventurers, they try it themselves. And then it's just plain over everything. I mean, I think so—the old Southern cooking, it is very, very, very few places.

AE: Well to talk more about the Greek community here in Birmingham, can you talk about what it was like when you first got here?

GS: Eh [short pause] Yeah. I mean, we have a—I mean, it was about—it's—it's in the church about fifteen hundred people. And the church—Greeks, they just have a love and hate relationship with church. They kind of more—ninety-nine from Greece, they Greek Orthodox. They like the church. A lot of them go to church for the, uh, social, uh, interaction with other Greek people. Eh, we speak the language. We—I mean, you'll find, which is very unusual, third or fourth generation Greeks to speak Greek. I mean, I have a baby, and I speak to him only in Greek. Uh, I have two other children—previous marriage--and they've been twelve times to Greece. Eh, [short pause] when I first came here, really, it was just—it was a lot more—it was a lot more my age. We used to be—really, I don't miss home much. Because it was so many Greek people in my age here, and we just kind—like a group. [Short pause] No, It was nice, really. The people in the South, I find them absolutely, eh—I--I've been here all these years, and I like hunting sometimes. We—we hunt rabbits. And, uh, anywhere I go in Alabama, I've never been—I've never—all these years, never [had] somebody told me besides one person one time, and he just happened to be Iranian. We have a disagreement, and he say, "Go back where you come from." And [short laugh] never, never, never I notice, eh, racism or anything, really. They've been very supportive, you know.

AE: Well how about the younger generations here now? Is there still a Greek school at the church?

GS: Yeah, we have Greek school at the church. And, um, everybody try to teach them the Greeks—the Greek. Uh, Greek national holidays we always have a dinner. They always have a speech. Eh, I think—I mean, that's what is—you have to remember because Greek Orthodox, it's not like Catholic--you have a—all over—spread all over the world. Greek Orthodox is kind of confined to them. And church is the social—

AAE: Um-hmm.

GS: --you know. Like I say, all of them--I'm telling you! [Laughs] We have this crazy relationship with church. You know what I mean.

AE: Well, I've been reading about the Holy Trinity Holy Cross –

GS: Yeah.

AE: --thing.

GS: I mean, it's the church—you walk in, we walk out, the service is too long. The priest, he say we talk too much because sometimes you go to church and you ask the—your neighbor—you know. You know, "You busy last night?" I mean, you know—type of thing. [Laughs] I mean it's just somewhat sacrilegious to people they—I invite sometimes to church. I mean, they think

we're crazy. But that's culture. I mean, you know, you have to kind of overlook that.

AE: Um, in this neighborhood there are--

GS: Yes.

AE: --plenty of Greek-owned restaurants, um, and quite a few hot dog stands. Do you have any opinion on how the hot dog stand came to a Greek-owned—

GS: Eh, I—

AE: --enterprise?

GS: Actually, uh—Tom's Coneys.

AE: Tom's Coneys?

GS: Which is—mmm, it's out of business now. It was—Tom Theodophilos, he was my great grandfather's name. Hot dogs, it was the easiest thing to sell. You know. He was more or less like —the carts. Those pushcarts in New York City? [Phone ringing] Which a lot of immigrants have, uh—I mean, that's how they start. It's easier. It's simple. You don't—my parents, they always have a hot dog stand. And my father, he don't speak no English, and my mother, she would speak less than a hundred—hundred words. But it's easier to--you know, you have to learn onions, ketchup--I mean, you know, nothing—I mean nothing—very simple. Chilidog, hot dog, cheese. Um, and it was a simple thing. But here—even there—uh, and here, you have to remember that those hot dog stands, only Greeks—they can open it. They used to be, I would say probably forty, fifty places in late sixties. And now they started—people—people, they don't eat no more hot dogs. I mean, somewhat—I quit eating—it's kind of, uh----I—I mean, I go eat hot dogs probably once a year. Just to kind—something, you know, just like, uh—I like to go—like fried chicken twice of year, you know, type of thing.

AE: Are you any relation to Jimmy Sarris from Jimmy's Hot Dogs?

GS: Yeah, he—we cousins.

AE: Okay.

GS: In fact, his sons work with us, you know—the import—

AE: Really?

GS: --company. Yeah, yeah. He's—

AE: Do your—

GS: He's one of the last of the breed of, you know—

AE: Yeah, I understand that they might have to—

GS: Yeah.

AE: --close soon, too.

GS: Yeah. Yeah. He's the—one of the last—yeah.

AE: Um, and your two children, do they work here at the restaurant?

GS: Yeah, I have a daughter go to college, Birmingham Southern. She helps me here. And my son, he's going to high school and he—see he help us in, uh, wholesale house. Yeah.

AE: So you kind of seem like the Greek Ambassador to Birmingham with all this import and export business that you have and—

GS: Yeah, we [short pause] I mean, ye—and I'm going to tell you th—when you leave from your country, and you go somewhere else like United States--in particular United States. Because it's very unusual but, uh—because I talk to, uh, the people I grew up in high school at least—I mean, I have a friends [short pause] from Zambia, Germany, Argentina, Venezuela, uh, United States, uh, Canada, Australia. I mean, really—we can—and it's very unique to the United States. When you come here, really, you love this country. And it's just like—the thing, though, it's just like you have envisioned yourself [phone rings] you have a mother, which she loves you. That's your home country. Then a mother-in-law—I'm—I'm sorry, a stepmother, which is—she loves you the same thing. And it's the same thing. And it is a tug, really. I mean, uh, you love here, but yet your mind—you know. Like, for instance, I have this crazy idea. After I die, I want to bury me there. My wife, she say, "No way!" I'm going to put in my will, you know, to do that. But I don't the she would honor it. It's nothing to it. I mean, you know. I mean, it's—it's just a mindset. But literally, it's like two mothers.

AE: That's a good analogy.

GS: Yeah, I'm serious. And a mother-in-law which is very, very nice to you. That loves you. But, eh—[short pause] It's hard. I mean, all the way—and—and—it—it don't matter if you grow up poor. I mean, we was very poor, really. I mean, uh—but---what—where you was born in. If you have a, you know—anyway.

AE: Well, um, I also understand [knock at the office door] that you teach cooking classes. Can you tell me—

GS: I used to do it.

AE: --a little bit about that?

GS: But I don't have time no more, and I don't got—I used to do it at UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham] but it's—it's—it's—you know, it's a couple things you have to be prepared for and you be up for it. And, really, we've been so busy and traveling and all that kind of stuff and—no, I--I cannot do it no more. No.

AE: How did that come about initially?

GS: Eh, it—it was in a [unintelligible phrase] store. They wanted some, uh, immigrants to teach people. And actually, we have classes with forty, fifty people. Which they would pay a hundred dollars or something, you know I mean, to take it. Which is—really, the other thing in the South--people they was [phone rings] starving, you know, for new things. And [short pause] I—I'm telling you. Uh, some people in the South—*some* people in the South—they always, even back then with the Italians and old -original Greeks—they felt like they come here, take their jobs and they this and that and that. And they do this now with the Mexicans or the South Americans or some of the Africans. [Phone ringing] But if you look at history, though. [Short pause] I mean, the immigrants really, which they make this country what it is. I mean, in culture, in—you know. And besides that, a lot of these immigrants, they go to wars, they die like the people that were—that come with Mayflower. I mean, it's no different. Of course, here in the South, little bit like—especially with Mexicans. I mean I see it—used to be not that much. But now, I can see it. But look how much the Mexicans con—contribute. How much [short pause] I mean, you go to Mexican restaurants, you hear nice Gr—Mexican music, how nice! I mean, that's what's life about it. I mean, you can, uh—

AE: So do you consider the Fish Market a Greek restaurant?

GS: In my head, yes. Somebody walk [in from] outside, no. But in my head, yes. I mean, we speak Greek. I mean, we don't care who listen—we care who, eh, eh, who—it might offend somebody, but we speak Greek. I mean, yeah! I mean, we drink coffee, we have-- my father, he has a lot of people that come see him. You know, he just retired and he just don't have nothing to do, and he comes here. Put his apron on, his friends come, and they're loud. They talk politics, they—you know. Yeah, I consider myself Greek restaurant.

AE: Where did your father retire from working?

GS: From a hot dog stand here.

AE: What was the name of it?

GS: Sarris Hot Dogs.

AE: Okay.

GS: Used to be Dino's, and then it become Sarris Hot Dogs. Yeah.

AE: Where was it located?

GS: It was on Fourth Avenue—North. And Eighteenth Street. It is—it was about two—two blocks from the church. You know, they bombed back then. [16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church]

AE: Okay. I just was by there--

GS: Of course, yeah. They're very, very—really. Eh, my parents, uh—they—they come here. Then after a couple of years, we bought the place for them. And it was—they have their own business.

AE: Did they come here after you did?

GS: No. Me and my mother and my sister come here first. To work. To get the money for the rest of the family come. I have, uh, two sis—I'm sorry, I have three sisters and one brother. One of my sisters, she's an attorney. She's in Texas. She live in Texas now. She's—see—uh, and one of my sisters has—a—a deli here, Sophia's Deli, that's what they call them. And my brother works for her. And my other sister go back to Greece. Which, after she go back to Greece and her son grew up, they come here and they work here now.

AE: Why did she go back to Greece?

GS: She married a man, uh, from our village, and his parents, they were sick. And they just go over there, take care of the parents. Then they have another child and—kind of stuck there. Yeah.

AE: So what do you see as the future of the Fish Market Restaurant?

GS: It—In fact, as we speak, we're in the process of expanding, and we're going to go the big building in the back—the huge building?

AE: Yeah.

GS: And we're going to have like, uh, fif—fourteen thousand square foot seafood market. Fresh and live fish and restaurant and—and, uh, I'm thinking, one time on Saturday night after ten o'clock, I'm going to have a Greek night. Which, I want to have two, three items—and if you're ever in

the South, please give us a call. You know, really. I mean, uh, you know. Just people [hits desk with fist for emphasis] starved for something different now. People, they're not as closed-minded as before about the music or about the taste of the food. I mean, think about it. Forty years ago, if you would say [drops fist on desk] "Souvlaki," they would say, "What the hell is that?" Now, I mean, you know, even, uh—even a guy who might never try, but he knows what it is. I mean, you know. Yeah. [Short pause] And he-- I'm telling you, here—here in the South, the bud—the taste buds? Yeah. The taste buds of the public is changed thousand percents. I mean—

AE: Definitely.

GS: You know. Yeah.

AE: Do you have an item that's the most popular thing here? Or a couple of them?

GS: I would say probably fried shrimp.

AE: Yeah.

GS: You know?

AE: Well, I had the lemon pepper Amberjack today—

GS: And you like it.

AE: --and it was excellent.

GS: Yeah, you see here, lemon pepper Amberjack, we was the first to start selling it. You know. And it is—and we—we bring it—and I'm proud of that. When we open the Fish Market back then, we start bringing different things. And we still do. We—we going to put in a new menu in the next, uh, twenty days, and we're going to have frog legs, we have a turtle, we're going to have oyster stew—

AE: Turtle, you say?

GS: Yeah. Turtle soup, yeah.

AE: Turtle soup? Wow.

GS: Yeah. Which is—not many places—very, you know—

AE: That's a very Louisiana dish.

GS: Yeah, yeah. But you see, you'd be surprised, people—but back then, even if you—Louisiana, they always have their own kitchen. Birmingham, it

was far away in a way. People, they would not travel—they would not have the excess money to go out to eat. Now people they have a lot more money, or they have a lot more credit cards. [Short pause] Which, probably the second one.

AE: [Laughs]

GS: But the people travel—travel and—think about it yourself. I mean, if you go somewhere—uh, and you see—I mean, you go to Mexico and you taste different things. When you come back, you go to Mexican restaurant and you try to find just about the same thing. I mean you're just—different person.

AE: Yeah.

GS: Yeah.

AE: Well, is there anything that you'd like to add? [Short pause] That we didn't cover?

GS: Mm, no. But, uh, thank you for doing this.

AE: Sure.

GS: And, uh, yeah, I think so—it's [short pause] I hope all these things never get lost, you know, for the next generations. How even the food evolved, or how the culture evolved in the South. What it was and what it is now. Uh—

AE: That's precisely why I'm here.

GS: Yeah, eh—my wife, she's American. How the mix of the different cultures really makes this country great. I mean, you know. Uh, it—back then in 1920s—I mean, if it was a Greek guy marry American girl, I mean it was a sin. And vice-versa! I mean, you know, if a Greek guy—I mean, if an American girl take a Greek guy, she was just—I mean, you know, it was like, uh, that—I mean, you know, it was ostracized. You were ostracized—What is that word?

AE: Ostracized?

GS: Ostracized in, uh, the community—the respective communities. Now it's—it's just, you know—I think [the] South [has] come a long way. [Short pause] I don't hear the black [short pause] the "n" word. I used to hear when I first come here ten times a day. Now I'll probably hear it once a month. To me, that's progress. Extremely progress. And when somebody say it, somebody always say, "Come on, now. I mean, you're overdoing it." Uh, you don't hear many jokes about all the races, you know [Sound of fax machine dialing out] I—I think it's a long way [sound of fax machine transmitting]—come a long way.

AE: Yeah. Well, and this is a timely project because it's the fortieth anniversary—

GS: Yeah.

AE: --of the Civil Rights legislation.

GS: Yeah.

AE: And Vulcan's one-hundredth birthday this summer and--

GS: Yeah. I think. You know, the only thing I think the, eh—the only thing I see [short pause] little bit—the Fundamental Christians. They kind of—and if I offend you, I'm sorry. I mean, they kind of try to take us back a little bit. And it's—I mean, you know—and I don't think that Christianity is what is all about it at all. Actually, the opposite.

AE: Yeah.

GS: It's buries everybody, even—you know—even the ones it's—the sinners. And I think so, that it is—really, it's—it worries me a little bit. It worries me a little bit. It really does. It, uh--

AE: Sometimes when things happen too fast for some people, they scramble to take some back steps so—

GS: I—and I think so sometimes different groups, they—they worry [hits desk with hand] [short pause] Or I don't know. I mean, eh, to me, anybody which is extremely zealous about religion is dangerous person. Regardless of he's a Muslim or a—a—a Southern Christian or a Northern Catholic. I mean—I mean, they—they—the extremes is not—you know. Uh, the racists, they've come a long way here. I'm serious. [Short pause] Uh, people who would [have] never thought they would invite another race to the house for dinner or go out to dinner—it would—you would be amazed. People I know—and I knew them from back then—and I see them now at sixty years old or seventy years old, they do have black friends over to the house for dinner.

AE: Well when I walked into your restaurant today, it was a really good illustration of—

GS: Yeah, yeah.

AE: --that. I mean, this is--

GS: Of course, from the first time I opened the restaurant, we make a effort to advertise on the black radio stations. I mean, it was a conscious effort.

And it was—somewhat, uh, business decisions. But—but [for] the most part it was—I want to run a place, which is more or less everybody. And—and we done it, really We done it. I mean, there's a —the help, I have, uh, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Mexican, Swedish, uh, Italian—Petito, he is here—eh, [short pause] Greek, of course. And I mean, you know, think about it! Everybody—I mean, you know, I saw the—Saturday night was extremely busy, and this--one of the Swedish cashiers—she's going to school here, and she works part-time. Uh, she wanted something for the, uh--a black gentleman, which—he is, eh—in—on a grill, and she want it fast. And he—you know, you know—he done it. And she give him a hug and "Thank you." You know what I--I mean, really, to me—I mean, that's just—you know? Really, I mean how many b—you know, all these groups, you put them together, and they work harmoniously and now we're this—I mean, it's just like—unbelievable.

AE: Yeah. Well, that's a great little microcosm you have here.

GS: Yeah, and—you know. And we never, never have any—any—I never see any animosity one group or another one. Nothing. I mean, they work—I mean, unbelievable. [Short pause] Anyway, I hope the whole society be like that anyway.

AE: Well, it's a great thing you have here, and I certainly—

GS: Thank you.

AE: --appreciate your contribution to the project. It's been lovely visiting with you.

GS: Thank you very much.

AE: Thank you.

**[END]**