

NIKI'S WEST: Pete Hontzas

233 Finley Ave. West
Birmingham, AL 35204
(205) 252-5751

"I chose [to work in] the kitchen because—I guess, being the oldest son, I kind of want to follow my dad in that way. Because he used to cook. So I kind of learned from him and just kind of—I really enjoy it."

--Pete C. Hontzas

Gus Hontzas came to the states from Greece and landed in Jackson, Mississippi, where his uncle, John Hontzas, had a restaurant called John's. When the Hontzas family opened up the Niki's restaurants in Birmingham (Niki's Downtown opened in 1951 and Niki's West opened in 1957), Gus headed to the Magic City to run Niki's West. Gus passed away in 2001, but his sons, Pete and Teddy, run the place today. The cafeteria line at Niki's West is legendary. Mid-morning you can find folks in line, piling their plates high with some of the freshest and most colorful vegetables in Birmingham. And if the cafeteria line isn't your style, they also have an a la carte menu where you'll find even more fresh seafood, steaks and a few traditional Greek dishes. Most folks who pass in front of the steam table at Niki's West might be surprised to know that there was a lounge in the back of the place in the old days. And evidently, the lounge (and yes, Mrs. Hontzas confirmed it, there was a go-go dancer involved) was where part of the expanded kitchen is today. If those walls could talk!

Interview Transcription:

Pete C. Hontzas, Co-Owner
NIKI'S WEST
233 Finley Ave. West
Birmingham, AL 35204
(205) 252-5751

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
DATE: March 9, 2004 @ 10:00 a.m.
LOCATION: Booth in main dining room
LENGTH: Approx. 35 minutes

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: customers sitting at booths adjacent to ours can be heard talking, servers can be heard interacting with customers, and the bus cart can be heard rolling by. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

* * *

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Tuesday, March eighth, two thousand and four and I—actually, I think it's March ninth, correct?

Pete Hontzas: March ninth.

AE: We'll check on that. [Laughs] And I'm at Niki's West with Pete Hontzas and, um, we're in a booth in the back of the dining room, and this is our sound check.

AE: Okay Mr. Hontzas, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and your age?

PH: Uh, Pete C. Hontzas. Age thirty-eight.

AE: Okay. And your grandfather—from what I understand—came to Birmingham in the early—

PH: Came to New Orleans.

AE: New Orleans? Okay. Can you tell us that story a little bit?

PH: Uh, w—from what I can remember, uh, he went to New Orleans in the late—maybe early twenties and, uh, opened a restaurant [doesn't know the name of it] up in New Orleans. And, uh, made a little money and went back to, uh, Greece.

AE: Where in Greece did he come from?

PH: Uh, Lethulnethion.

AE: Any idea how to spell that?

PH: No. [Laughs]

AE: Okay. [Laughs] I'll look it up. Um, so he came to make some money and then take the money back to his family? Is that—

PH: That's correct.

AE: Okay. And then, how did your father get to come to Birmingham?

PH: He sent, uh, my father, which was Gus, over to the states. Of course my grandfather had a brother living here already, so my dad stayed with him in, uh, Jackson, Mississippi, and that's where my dad learned the [short pause] restaurant business, so to speak.

AE: Okay, and what were all of their names? Your uncle and your father and your grandfather?

PH: My grandfather was m—named—I'm named after my grandfather [Pete], and my uncle's name was John, John Hontzas. And my dad's name is Gus Hontzas.

AE: Okay, And the restaurant in Jackson? Was that John's restaurant?

PH: John's restaurant—[called] Johnny's restaurant, yeah.

AE: Okay. In Jackson, Mississippi. Interesting connection there. And what kind of restaurants were these?

PH: Uh, family-oriented. Uh, serve, uh, a--much a variety of Southern-type food along with some Greek dishes also.

AE: Do you know how they got to be in the restaurant business?

PH: [Short pause] Let me s—let me make this statement without having to be stereotypical, most Greeks *are* in the restaurant business—in those days. I--I'll leave it at that. Let you all figure that one out! [Laughs]

AE: All right. Well, a lot of people—

PH: But—but I don't mind, now. I don't—that's—that's part of my heritage.

AE: Right. Well, I've been getting from some people that it's an easy way to bring people over from Greece and have them learn a—a business and--and hire family members and—

PH: I—as far as early immigrants? It probably was.

AE: Yeah.

PH: `Cause, uh, certain immigrants, like the Italians that owned the grocery stores, and the—the Jewish people are known for their jewelry and the clothing stores—they're just—some made—once somebody got started they all kind of followed.

AE: Sure. And your father—from John's restaurant in Jackson—

PH: Right.

AE: How did he make it over to Birmingham?

PH: Uh, good question. What I can recollect, that, uh, [short pause] his, uh—my dad—my grandfather's sister, which was named Margaret Callas, had

two places opened up. And then Niki's Downtown on 2nd Avenue. And they opened the place up here, and they let their nephews [short pause] operate each business. So my dad was given the opportunity to operate this place here. And the other nephews were all given the opportunity to run the one downtown. [Short pause] And that's how they got started. [Pete later explained that the Niki's restaurants were named after Margaret and Johnny Hontzas's daughter Niki.]

AE: And this restaurant opened when?

PH: In fifty-seven.

AE: Okay, and what was it like then?

PH: A hole in the wall. [Laughs]

AE: Yeah?

PH: That's all it was. Just a stopping place for somebody to come eat some vegetables—very few vegetables—and, uh, just a meeting place. That's all. Basically it was just a—a truck stop or—you can call it that or—of course, we're close to the Farmer's Market, so a lot of the farmers would come down here and eat, and it was just a very quaint little place [sound of a cup of coffee being placed on the table]—very little.

AE: When it was opened, was there anything on this property before? Was it a restaurant before or was it built and then established as Niki's West?

PH: It was built as a—a—a—my dad—a doctor had owned some land around here, and my dad bought the land from my—from this doctor [short pause] which I don't have his name. But, uh, he, uh, sold it to my dad just built on the business as time went on.

AE: Okay. So it was—

PH: So it really was nothing here. Just s—a little alley here and a little alley there and that was it.

AE: Did he purposely, um, find the property near the Farmer's Market and the produce stands and whatever, or was that--?

PH: No, it's just, uh—the place was here, and they just kind of just had a vision that this would be a good place, and since it's off the interstate and, uh, close to downtown without having to be downtown, that people could come all—from all directions. Centrally located to—to—to where Birmingham and the people lived at the time. Because at that time, south of Birmingham was farmland, so everybody either lived north, west or east of Birmingham. So that's why he just—kind of picked this place here.

AE: Okay. Were there any—or have there ever been any other restaurants in the area?

PH: Uh, there's a restaurant down the street called, uh—two--about two blocks down—called the Smoke House. My dad's brother runs that.

AE: It's still there?

PH: Yeah, he's still there.

AE: Okay. Um, and you were born in Birmingham I gather.

PH: Yes.

AE: And you have a brother.

PH: Teddy.

AE: Do you have any sisters?

PH: One sister, Margo.

AE: Okay. And you've been in the restaurant business all of your life?

PH: [Laughs] From the time I can remember—six, seven, eight years old—every summer bussing tables, washing dishes.

AE: Yeah. So you grew up in the restaurant, huh?

PH: Grew up. It's like—it is my home, basically.

AE: Yeah.

PH: And one part of my world, and the other part of the world—my home is home. In one part of my world this *is* home.

AE: Yeah.

PH: This is home.

AE: And, um, the restaurant's obviously grown since it's original days. How—

PH: Oh, yeah.

AE: --many people can you seat in here now?

PH: Uh, about four thirty-five, four fifty.

AE: My goodness. And how has the menu changed over the years?

PH: Actually, I—

AE: Or the—

PH: I—I—believe it or not, it actually has shortened quite a bit. Because—

AE: Really?

PH: --in those days—in those days, they would do a lot of, uh [short pause] [clears throat] If you go to most places now, they—they specialize in certain things. In those days they cooked anything. From omelets during the nighttime--we'd serve oyster omelets at night. I mean, b—we—we didn't have the volume. I think you get the volume of business, you have to disintegrate the menu somewhat.

AE: Make it manageable.

PH: Yeah. It's—they had a lot more stuff.

AE: Yeah.

PH: And, uh, part of me wishes—I mean, I remember some of that but not—not—not too much of it.

AE: Yeah.

PH: But, uh [short pause] We do so much volume otherwise, with the cafeteria line, the a la carte orders, it's just hard to put everything on there. It's just--

AE: Sure.

PH: -- impossible.

AE: And you're open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

PH: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

AE: Seven days a week?

PH: Six days a week.

AE: Six days.

PH: Monday through Saturday.

AE: Okay. And I remember when I visited here with you before with John T., you were talking about, um, some story about a—a go-go room or a club in the back?

PH: Well in those days, again, you know, those, uh—that was, uh, one of the, uh, fortes of Birmingham was, uh, lounges. That was it in Birmingham. You had the restaurant, but the main thing, we had—and—and—during the s—especially during the sixties, the lounge was the biggest asset to a business—or restaurant—so-called restaurant bar or whatever you want to call it—was the biggest asset to a business was a lounge.

AE: Lounge meaning alcohol?

PH: Alcohol.

AE: And entertainment?

PH: And entertainment, yes. Or—however you want to define--

AE: Okay, okay.

PH: --everything, that's up to you.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: But that was—that was part of it. You know, that's just the way it was. It's—Niki's Downtown [it's] the same way. A lot of places in downtown Birmingham. More so in downtown Birmingham, but that was just a way of life in those days.

AE: Do you remember or have you heard any stories about those days that would be—

PH: Not really.

AE: --re-tellable.

PH: My mom remembers [short pause] bringing me down here when I was like four or five years old and [short pause] you know. But I don't remember the go-go—I don't remember the go-go dancers. And I, you know, four or five years old, I cant remember too much of anyway.

AE: Yeah.

PH: But, uh, she remembers them. You know, being down here and [short pause] go-go dancing! I don't know what else you call that. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

PH: Do what they had to do. Now—it's all the kitchen now.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: The lounge was bigger than the restaurant itself.

AE: Yeah? And the original lounge area is now the—the—

PH: Kitchen.

AE: Kitchen.

PH: Baking and the main kitchen now.

AE: If those walls could talk!

PH: So I—that tells you how big it was.

AE: Right, right.

PH: That's how big of a thing it was in those days.

AE: Huh. And I also remember you said that your father would stay open for the truckers in the snow.

PH: My d—we used to stay open twenty-four hours a day.

AE: My goodness.

PH: We would stay open from at—I don't know exactly when they started cutting the hours down. And then we'd stay open to twelve, then it came down to eleven, and then it came down to ten. Now it's down to nine-thirty, you know.

AE: And you open at six a.m. I see.

PH: Yeah. Used to be open—used to open at five in the summertime. Of course, in summertime you have all the farmers coming in early.

AE: Yeah.

PH: And they want breakfast, so you try to—you know, just try to make the extra dollar. In those days a dollar was hard to come by. You had to do everything *to* make the dollar. And you had to save a lot more than we do now. We--we take for granted—we—you know, that the dollar's going to be there and we don't—especially our generation.

AE: Yeah.

PH: We take for granted it's going to be there. Those days—it wasn't—it—it—you had to work like hell to *get* a dollar.

AE: Yeah.

PH: Now we just expect a dollar. You know.

AE: Can you talk a little bit more about that? The--the first generation of Greek—Greek's to be born in Birmingham and the restaurant business and the work ethic and maybe how things have changed over the years?

PH: Uh [short pause] The parents themselves—the ones who come over—of course, my mom was born in—in the states. She was born in the states but, uh—since my--

AE: What's her name?

PH: Betty. Betty Hontzas. And, uh, her, uh—uh—uh, but where you have a first generation like my dad and—and the other people, you know, they see an opportunity they didn't have in Greece in those days. To excel. That's why my grandfather said—to my dad [he] goes, "You—you—your better off going over there and making something of yourself than staying here." Which was Greece, of course. Um, so they're a little tougher. They [short pause] they were not—I think they were respected, but they weren't liked by a lot of people. [Short pause] Different groups of people. That's just, you know—the—the climate of those days. So they had to work and sacrifice a lot, but they were very tough people. And, of course, now when we grew up—my generation grew up—we were expected to do what my dad could do. You know, he's—I think they put the—those—those type people put you on a pedestal. And you're supposed to obtain it. Either match them or do better. So it's a lot harder for a person—second generation to work under a first generation father. Especially if—

AE: It's a lot to live up to.

PH: --if he's morally and ethically correct, it makes it di—you know. It makes it real hard to, uh, obtain maintain that. So he would always be—we—it hasn't been an easy road, I promise you. It's just very hard. They expect it out of you.

AE: And you and your brother both still work here, and you alternate shifts—

PH: [Laughs]

AE: --you mentioned earlier.

PH: Yeah. Yes, we do. Yes, we do. And it's a grind. And it's a sacrifice. It's not a sacrifice like people want to call it. You know, "I sacrifice—I work forty hours a week." It don't work like that here. We just, uh—you have to sacrifice family, friends, social gatherings, social this, uh [short pause] And it's just, uh—your physical sacrifice, your mental sacrifice, all of it's sacrificed. If you want to be successful.

AE: Yeah.

PH: Not what people call successful—you can define that many ways but—but that's what my dad called it—like what we're doing now. And it still ain't good enough! [Laughs] Sometimes. That just—you know.

AE: Do either you or your brother have your own children?

[Mr. Hontzas takes a sip of water.]

PH: My brother has four kids [Georgia, Sophia, Olivia, Constantine]. Recently has twins. We have, uh, his first-born is a girl, second-born girl, third born—which was a twin—girl, and the—finally had the first son in the family.

AE: [Laughs] Do you--

PH: About two minutes late.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: And myself, I have two girls [Jacqueline & Zoë].

AE: Is it—are any of them going to go into the restaurant business, you think?

PH: [Short pause] That's hard to call. I—I mean I don't know. I don't know if, you know, uh, we don't know what the changes are ahead, you know. I guess we'll just—just—the changes will dictate how we do it. You know. They won't have to work as hard as we did. Although they would appreciate it more if they did. But today's climate and the politically correct ways? Who knows.

AE: Do any of them have any interest that you can see?

[Short pause]

PH: [Laughs] Uh, well we always—now me and my brother never had an interest, per se. I think we got tired of it. But as we got older and learned, you know, how you're going to make your living and what chances you have of making a better living for yourself, then I think that justifies what you do,

you know. You know, I'd like for them to do a little bit more than they do—are but, uh—of course the mothers now, they're not as—they're a little more, uh—a little more demanding of what the kids do instead of the father just taking control and telling them what they're going to do.

AE: Um-hmm.

PH: Unfortunately. So--you know, it depends what the climate's like now—the—the—what's expected out of the restaurant and this that and the other. And what they can sacrifice like we have, which they probably won't be able—they won't be able to do that physically like we do. And, uh, we make changes here. Adaptable for them we—c—possibly, they could have a chance at it.

AE: Well let me ask you, have you—

PH: I'm not going to *make* them do it, you know.

AE: Sure. Have you visited Greece?

PH: I have never been. Neither have my—I—my mom's the only one that's been over there, and of course my dad came from there. He's been over there too but--but as far as, uh, my brother, my sister, myself have never been yet. And that's part of the sacrifice we made. My dad made us stay here. He—he--you know—tried to build a business, you know, you don't always get a chance to do what you want to do.

AE: Yeah.

PH: And so—we've been left out on that part.

AE: Well you say you haven't been *yet*, so that implies that—

PH: Well I'm--I hope—hopefully—

AE: --you'd like to.

PH: --I'll get a chance to go. In a cou--you know, in the next few years.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: We want to go but, uh, right now things are to stay in Birmingham and work.

AE: [Laughs] Well and, um, let me also ask you, what year did your father pass?

PH: He passed away January thirtieth, two thousand one. And it's been different.

AE: Yeah, how so?

PH: Well, you [short pause] you miss him. Even though he was hard on you, you still miss him. There's not a day goes by I don't think about him. You know, and we have cooks here—been here a long time and people who'll work with him and they, you know, they ask me about—they still miss him. They just, you know, it was Niki's.

[Short pause]

AE: Was he always out here in the dining room with customers?

PH: Actually, he started in the kitchen and then as the business evolved he—he kind of—not really wanting to come out of the dining room. He'd rather be in a kitchen. He always believed that was more important than the little knickknacks of a dining room manager. Which it is to me too. I'd just as—you know, because of the, uh—you know, people come to a restaurant for food first, obviously.

AE: Um-hmm.

PH: But, uh—

AE: So your father was a good cook?

PH: Not—but he learned under a chef. Actually a German chef, when he was working at John's in, um, Jackson.

AE: Really?

PH: It was a German chef, yeah.

AE: Really? Interesting.

PH: That's where he learned it.

AE: Huh.

PH: Yeah, cooking—cooking today is not—it's gotten too, uh, specialized. Uh, you know—it's—it's—it's gotten—there are some old tricks of the trade that—that I kind of learned from my dad, which you can't use anymore because of health conscious people.

AE: Uh-huh.

PH: But, uh, there are some good tricks to learn though.

AE: Like—what? Can you—

PH: Well, use--like when you carve ham you take the bone, the fat and all that? Put it in the greens and peas and beans and all that. You don't throw nothing—in other words, in a business like we have, you don't throw nothing away. It can be used again somewhere down the line. But since people are health conscious now, you throw that bone in there and the ham—the fatback and all that and cholesterol levels go up. [Throws hands up in the air for emphasis] You know, cooking really to me has, uh, changed—really a lot in the last ten years. It's changed like every ten years—just *major* changes. But, uh, we've had to be more conscious. My dad was smart enough to change. I don't think he really *wanted* to change a lot of things, but I think he was really smart enough to know that if you don't change then [short pause] older people are not going to come, younger people don't come because they know their cholesterol levels—"Oh, I eat at Niki's every day so—that's got to be the problem so--" I—Sometimes change is not all for the best.

AE: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about the food that you serve here? I mean, you're known for your vegetables.

PH: Vegetables—we—we have, you know, ten entrees every day. Uh, which about four or five change daily, and we keep two or three every day. Uh, vegetables, pretty much the same every day. We've got forty different varieties if you include the salads and the pasta salads and the fruit and all that. We—we charge them like a vegetable. Uh, all our bread's homemade, all our pies and desserts are homemade. And if that's not good enough for you, you can go order off the menu. Go—we serve fresh seafood like snapper—whole snapper, whole flounders, fresh scallops, fresh grouper. Everything's fresh. Nothing frozen.

AE: Where do you get your fish and your produce and your meat?

PH: Uh, we get a little bit from uh—uh—from some local—a local company called Marcus Empire. We get a little bit from some fishermen we know. You know, if they're able to get something for us. You know, by—by dealing with a bigger company—they're able to get something a little quicker for you if you need it, you know. But I like to, you know, get some from the local guy, if you can find one that's honest enough to deal with. That's a problem. They're not all too honest.

AE: And you mentioned you use Kontos Produce, um, which is a—

PH: Kontos and—

AE: --Greek—Greek-owned company.

PH: That's Greek-owned. We use Dixieland Produce and then we have some—by being close to the Farmer's Market you get accustomed to knowing farmers and they help us out quite a bit through the year. And, uh, we get farmer's, uh, like I tell any kind of local farmer, "I'd rather buy it from y'all than I would—" Not to mention Kontos and Dixieland, but they--their produce stays in that cooler three or four days longer. Now summertime—this time like April—between April and September? I get everything—if a farmer's got a load of squash, I'll buy as many as I can from him because he's trying to make it just like I am.

AE: Right.

PH: And I—I don't—I want to help him [pounds table for emphasis].

AE: Yeah, that's wonderful to keep it local.

PH: Plus—Plus, their vegetables are ten—ten to one better because *they* grow it.

AE: Yeah.

PH: So—

AE: Well, back to the seafood element of what you serve here, the—the, um—can you explain a little bit how that relates to the—the theme of the restaurant here, with the nautical theme and what kind of choices those were and where they came from. Was that your father's idea?

PH: Well, like I said—like Johnny's in Jackson, this—this place is probably similar to Johnny's in Jackson where they did—they do the same thing we do. They have the vegetables during the day and—of course, we have vegetables at night too. And the seafood and—basically, if anybody wants to—a piece of snapper or anything, they can get it now [10:30 in the morning], they don't have to wait 'til dinner time. There's no such thing as five o'clock we're not serving no vegetables. Five o'clock you can't—you have to just order off the menu. We try to accommodate everybody.

AE: Um-hmm.

PH: And the seafood is very important because one, it's health conscious and two, it just tastes great. And that's probably the most important part.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: But that's—everybody loves good seafood.

AE: Sure. Um, and on your menu you also have John's slaw? Is that right?

PH: Uh, we call it Niki's slaw. No, we're—John's—Niki's slaw.

AE: Oh, is that right? I think I read that somewhere. And there's also a John's slaw on the menu at, uh—well, there *is* a John's slaw on the menu at The Fish Market.

PH: Well, they—they're probably famous for it. They started it and, uh—

AE: And it's the—the red slaw?

PH: Yeah. Slaw with a little dressing on top.

AE: Uh-huh.

PH: And, uh, people love it. For me, myself, I'm not a salad person, so I can't say I—could care less, really.

AE: Yeah.

PH: But people love it, and I just—personally, I'm not a salad eater so.

AE: [Laughs] Are there some items on the menu or on the steam table that y'all are particularly known for that maybe your father started?

PH: I'd like to say all of them, really.

AE: Yeah.

PH: I mean everybody likes—you know, everybody has—everybody loves our fried tomatoes. If you ask, people love the collard greens, love the turnip greens—they just like to food. The rutabagas, that's another famous thing everybody loves. And I—it really just depends upon the individual. I—I—a—as long as we're getting more compliments and only one or two complaints, you can't go wrong.

AE: Yeah.

PH: I mean, everybody likes all of it. They appreciate it—having the fresh vegetables—because so many places try to, uh, skim around all that. I guess because of labor or they just don't know any better, one of the two. But uh, we aim--mashed potatoes, we peel our own mashed potatoes, you know. It's—the old way of doing things.

AE: Are you in the kitchen as well?

[Short pause]

PH: I don't know how to answer this one! [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

PH: Unfortunately, yes.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: Sometimes. Sometimes, it's just great. It really is. Uh, Friday and Saturday nights I cook, and Teddy manages the dining room. And that's probably a good thing because sometimes they can get out of line and, uh, he--he's better able to smooth things over, where I'm going to let somebody know something—the way I feel, so that's probably why I—I just stay back there. I think I'm—a lot of reason why I did it? I chose the kitchen because—I guess, being the oldest son, I kind of want to follow my dad in that way. Because he used to cook. So I kind of learned from him and just kind of—I really enjoy it though.

AE: Do you cook at home?

PH: No.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: Cook steaks—grill, that's about all—it. But as far as real cooking? Cook myself a—you know, some pasta or something? I—I'll go out to eat before I do that. Yeah.

AE: Yeah? Where do you go out to eat?

PH: Uh, mostly family-owned business. Lavoy's. The Formosa. Papas Foods in Vestavia. I—probably the three main places I go to. I'm sure there's a couple of others I'm forgetting right off but, uh—when I go out there—I take my girls out to eat most--kind of places like that.

AE: Well lets talk about your clientele a little bit here. Um--

PH: Wow!

AE: [Laughs]

PH: They're very diverse, you might say. [Sniffs] Uh, you get a—you get a—you get a farmer, and you get a doctor and the same—you get councilmen, you get congressmen, you get uh—had the governor a few times. You get pastors, priests, lawyers, accountants, white collar, blue collar. It's just, uh, like a melting—like America itself, it's a melting pot.

AE: Would you say you have, um, a lot of people still just coming off the interstate to find you? And then also, a lot of really loyal long term customers—

PH: Long-term customers—

AE: --at the same time?

PH: --and word of mouth. And, uh [short pause] d—a few little advertisements—you know. The Internet—someone puts stuff up on the Internet for us. But, uh, mainly, it's just, uh, people recognizing, hopefully, what we try to put out: a good product. And word of mouth. And that's probably the best way and cheapest way to do it.

AE: Yeah.

PH: Because, uh-- [short pause]

AE: Reputation is everything.

PH: It means everything. It means everything, sure does.

AE: And I've heard people come here for lunch starting at like ten in the morning.

PH: I've [Mr. Hontzas is taking a sip of water]—excuse me. I've had, uh, people come in at nine o'clock, nine-thirty. You know, they know breakfast is here but they—they see, you know—most—we try to get all—most of—ninety percent of our food out by, uh, ten o'clock. So you'll have people coming in nine, nine-thirty. They're looking for breakfast, but they see the vegetables, they can't resist it.

AE: Yeah.

PH: So they get vegetables.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: Even if I don't have no meat up there—I may not have no—no meat up there, you know. It just depends what's cooking and how long it takes to get our there. They'll just eat three or four vegetables and w—they'll be happy.

AE: What kind of things do you serve for breakfast?

PH: We grate our own hashbrowns from real potatoes, grits, e—you know, of course, eggs. And you can get link sausage, patty sausage, smoked sausage, ham, bacon, uh, rice. People like rice. I'm one of those people that likes rice with eggs. That's the country way of eating it.

AE: Yeah, that seems a kind of combination, maybe, Greek-American thing and a New Orleans thing.

PH: I—it's definitely just New Orleans or Old South, I guess—

AE: Yeah.

PH: --you might say.

AE: How about the Southern influence in—in the restaurant here? Being a Greek-owned business.

PH: Uh, well. [Short pause] I think it's where you live. What you can serve. I mean, how would I—I would venture to say that most people across the Mason-Dixon line would appreciate a place like this than them coming down here and trying to open a restaurant. At least I would. And I think most folks—most people from across the Mason-Dixon line really love this place. They—they don't—they can't gather—they can't fathom all the—the food, you know. They're just used to—usually, I can pick them out of a crowd: mashed potatoes, English peas and carrots.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: That's all they know. You know—we had some guys—especially—I like to mess with them. You know, they'll go, "What—what—what's that?" I go, "You're--" I go and I tell them—you know, they'll be right in the middle of the line and it may be busy, and I'll go, "You're not from Birmingham, are you?" I go, "I can tell. Don't worry. I'm going to help you out." I'll tell them, "Get your fried okra, get you a little collard greens. You don't like it, send it back and I'll give you something to—you know, that you're used to having." You know.

AE: [Laughs] I also hear you have—

PH: I *want* them to try it. I want them to see what it's like.

AE: Sure, yeah, because they're missing out! Yeah.

PH: The simple cooking cannot be beat.

AE: Yeah.

PH: I mean you can try the fancy dishes, and you can try to—have an artistic approach about your cooking, but it comes down to simplicity and that's the best form of—way of life I know is keep it simple, everybody likes it.

AE: Yeah.

PH: You can't go wrong.

AE: Well, um, this is not—maybe—too simple, but I hear that you also have about four or five different kinds of okra or ways you serve okra in the summertime when the seasons hit.

PH: Well, let's see. I've got three: fried okra, of course; uh, boiled okra with, uh, onions and bell peppers; and a Greek-style okra with tomatoes. The same—okra and onions, bell pepper and a little tomato in there. That's just a—you want to call it—Italians call it Italian, and I remind them, I say, "This is the Greek way. You all can call it what you want." You know.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: Italian customers call it Italian, you know, just to mess with me.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: But that—it's the Greek way. A lot of the Greek dishes do have a lot of tomatoes in it. The people—

AE: What are some other Greek—

PH: --would think—they would think it would be Italian but they are—u, you know, like the zucchini squash that we have up there with tomatoes. And you could make chicken—Greek chicken with tomato-base way, and it's real good. My mom makes that--a wonderful thing. That's—I love that. My kids love it too. So it's not all Italian being tomatoes. [Short pause] And, uh, that's basically all the Greek stuff besides what we have on the, uh [short pause] on the a la carte menu, which we have the Greek snapper, and all our fish you can get Greek-style or just lemon-butter with, you know—broil it with lemon-butter. Now that's—we don't do too much, uh, Greek dishes, per se. And, uh, because it takes a lot of time. Most of those dishes take time. They're not, uh, something you can just—you can't throw together a—a quality Greek dish, like pastitsio or mousaka or—you can't just throw that up there. It don't work like that. Now we do have Greek chicken and, you know—four times a week. For entrée but—everybody loves our Greek chicken. Now that's another one—thing you asked about [that we're] famous for. That's—there's another one.

AE: Why only four times a week?

PH: Why? I know, it used—used to be less than that. But uh, Maybe we just upgraded it, I don't know. Everybody—we have the backed chicken and dressing on Mondays. [Short pause] uh, and then we have barbecued chicken on Wednesdays, so. I guarantee if we have Greek chicken every day

it would be hands down—out-sell all of those. Diver—diversify, I guess, is the correct word.

AE: [Laughs]

PH: [Laughs] You could call it that.

AE: Um, well can I ask your opinion on all these Greek-owned hot dog stands in town? I've conducted—

PH: Yeah, I was wondering—

AE: --a couple of interviews with those guys.

PH: My buddy Gus Koutroulakis, I was at his place, Pete's Famous—

AE: Yeah.

PH: --Sunday. And I try to go there once in a while. See, he comes here-- about twice a week he eats with me.

AE: Does he?

PH: At night. Yeah.

AE: I saw him yesterday and spent some time—

PH: I enjoy talking to him.

AE: Yeah. And what do you think it is about the hot dog stands that have been a primarily Greek-owned enterprise?

[Short pause]

PH: There's—it's part of the food business. I—I don't know how else to explain it. I mean, it's either a hot dog stand or a restaurant or a hamburger place, or it's just—it's a Greek influence of what they were brought up to do. They don't know any better. I don't know any—I couldn't go out there and [short pause] dig a ditch, probably! I don't know anything. I don't know—you know, I just don't work like that. That's just one of those, uh, traits that's been passed down a—as we get more into society now [takes a sip of water] you're seeing less, uh—you're seeing less Greek influence in the, uh, restaurant business.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, we're you raised—

PH: I think—I don't know if that's being smarter or they just got a better opportunity than their forefathers did. Obvious—it's probably a better

opportunity, obviously. But—you go to school, and they become—whatever. White collar workers: doctors, lawyers, accountants or whatev—what have you. So they, uh—they, uh—and it's a lot of hard work. Very hard work. Very time consuming, very—mental stress, the physical stress. I think the mental stress gets you more than the physical stress. [Short pause] And that's probably the number one thing right there.

AE: Yeah.

PH: Why do I—it's a lot of headaches to put up with.

AE: Sure, with employees and all.

PH: Somebody doesn't show up—it's brakes, she got to go get it fixed, she's got to blah-blah this, every day it's something. It's never just a peaceful day. Never.

AE: How many employees do you have here?

PH: Uh, we keep around eighty-five. [Short pause] Give or take one or two, you know. But around eighty-five.

AE: And I know you said you have some who have been here a long time. Who's been here the longest would you say?

PH: My head cook.

AE: Your head cook?

PH: She's been here since nineteen sixty-nine.

AE: What's her name?

PH: Annie Mae [last name not given]. Sweet lady. Very good Christian lady. [Short pause] Do anything in the world for you. [Short pause] Just been very, very blessed by the Good Lord and that's—that's all I can say. I mean, that's it.

AE: Um-hmm.

PH: If it weren't for that, forget it. We've, uh, you know—like the scripture says, "To who much is given, much is expected." And a lot is expected, and we have to—we have to do it.

AE: Yeah. Well, um, let me ask you now, if you were—were you raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, or did you attend Greek school or anything like that growing up?

PH: A little bit of Greek school. Not much. Uh, I think my dad, if he had to do it over again, would probably take a different route but—you know. We, uh, we, uh, he was a—always down here every day. I mean, he was here. We didn't do much. We went to church, don't get me wrong, but—we went to church but not like we should have probably. But now, as we get older, we realize, you know, we have to give credit where credit is due now. Not that we didn't. We always had that inner being, but we've always been—my dad was so focused on this place that I think sometimes in his life he forgot the family which—it didn't bother me too much—I understood where he was coming from. The family, the church and this, that and the other until he got older, he realized, you know, he needed to make a change. Of course, now me and my brother are older and have to work the hours he had to work too. He didn't have nobody helping him. I don't think he trusted just anybody either. So that's just part of the sacrifice you have to do, you know.

AE: Yeah. Do you speak Greek at all?

PH: Not—very little.

AE: Yeah.

PH: I mean, very—very little. Because a lot of kids, you know, their—their mothers will take them to Greece, and their fathers take them to Greece, and that's how you learn. You don't learn it by Greek school. You have to go to Greece and spend about a month there when you're a kid. And you—you—you—it becomes to you second nature. It's like if you stay here in America for--from—from whatever country it is, and you stay here a few months, you—you pick up on it. And that's just the way it is. It's a very hard language to learn just to—

AE: Um-hmm.

PH: --to learn.

AE: Sure.

PH: It's impossible.

AE: Well, can you say a couple of words about the Greek community here? Because there's a really strong, um, Greek community from what I can see and from what I've heard.

PH: Uh [short pause] Let's put it like this: they have five different—they had five minds, but like Mr. Gus told me at Pete's Famous, they have five minds but eight different ways of doing everything. [Laughs] That's about—like I say, very—it is strong. Uh, it's like any other immigrant, uh, people coming to a new country. You know, they try to stick together and—but, uh, as we go in time now, and the years pass by, you're seeing that diversify a little bit.

And it's not maybe as strong as it should be. I don't know if that's a good—good way of putting it. It's not as strong as it should be, but is that good or bad, we don't know. But it's nice to have a good community with your family, your friends that are Greek, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

PH: And that's something that our generation probably lacks a little bit than the past generations do. And we're trying to obtain that, but we just have a little—as a matter of fact, my cousins—all my—all the Hontzas cousins—we all got together Sunday, and we're going to try to do that about once a month. And that's something we should have been doing a long time ago, it just—with the wordly cares of life we forget about these things.

AE: Um-hmm. What do you do when you get together?

PH: I guess like everybody else, eat and, uh, talk and all that—all that kind of stuff, really. Just get together. Just knowing we are still family. We need to get together more as a family though.

AE: Well, that would be an excellent note to end on, unless you have anything that you'd like to add.

PH: No, you're asking the questions. I'm just [laughs]—

AE: [Laughs]

PH: I'm responding.

AE: Well, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me and I—

PH: No problem.

AE: --enjoyed visiting with you.

PH: Any time.

AE: Okay.

PH: Thank you.

AE: Thank you.

PH: Now, go grab something—[Mr. Hontzas invites me to stay for lunch, but as we sit there visiting, his mother arrives at the restaurant for her duties as hostess. Mr. Hontzas calls her over to the booth where we are sitting, and I proceed to interview her about Niki's West and her husband, Gus Hontzas. See Betty Hontzas transcript.]

[END]