

YIANNI'S

Vestavia City Center
700 Montgomery Hwy, Suite 156
Vestavia Hills, AL 35216

NOTE: *As of May 2004 Yianni's is no longer in operation.*

"[M]y uncle and grandfather were in the food business, and I used to hang out with them on, uh, Saturdays when I was out of school. I'd go to the markets with them, I'd work in the kitchen and just dec—decided that's what I wanted to do when I was a little kid."

--John Calamas

Owned by John Calamus, Yanni's ("John's" in Greek) is tucked away in the upscale Vestavia City Center and is a thoroughly modern addition to the city's long history of Greek-owned restaurants. John was born in Birmingham, and has fond memories of his grandfather and uncle, who were both in the food business. Evidently, food and Greek ingredients were in his blood. From a stint at Sneaky Pete's Hot Dogs (started by Pete Graphos) as a young man, to working with Frank Stitt at the acclaimed Highlands Bar & Grill, John got his feet wet in the restaurant business in extremes. Before opening Yanni's, John had Justin's, which was a casual steak and seafood restaurant. He was forced to relocate and the result was Yanni's. John says he likes infusing Greek ingredients into just about everything, and with things on the menu like champagne poached salmon egg rolls with tzaziki sauce and feta grits, there is no denying the Greek influence. New South, indeed!

Full Interview Transcription:

John Calamas, Owner
YANNI'S: A NUOVO GRILLE
Vestavia City Center
700 Montgomery Hwy, Suite 156
Vestavia Hills, AL 35216
(205) 823-7772

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
DATE: March 10, 2004 @ 2:00 p.m.
LOCATION: Yanni's
LENGTH: Approx. 15 minutes

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John Calamas: And we can turn down the music, too, if it's coming--

Amy Evans: It's fine. This is Amy Evans, and it's Wednesday, March tenth, and I'm at Yanni's restaurant with John Calamus. And, um, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and your age for the record, if you don't mind.

JC: Uh, my name is John Calamas. I'm fifty.

AE: Okay, and how did you get into the restaurant business?

JC: Ahh, I started at a very young age. I was [short pause] probably about eight years old, and my uncle and grandfather were in the food business, and I used to hang out with them on, uh, Saturdays when I was [short pause] out of school. I'd go to the markets with them, I'd work in the kitchen and just [short pause] dec—decided that's what I wanted to do when I was a little kid [laughing while talking]. You know, sometimes you want to kick yourself for that . [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] What were their names—your grandfather and--?

JC: Uh, Paul was my uncle and Jimmy was my grandfather. Scoolis [he pronounces this name *skoo-liss*] is their last name. They're from Cleveland, Ohio. They're—

AE: Okay. How do you spell that last name?

JC: Scoolis is, uh, S-C-L-O-O-I-S.

AE: Okay.

JC: I'm sorry, S-C-O-O-L-I-S. [Laughs]

AE: Okay. And before that, were they in Greece at all or—?

JC: Uh, my grandfather was born in Greece and came here and, uh, [short pause] both sides of my parents were born here, but all my grandparents were born in Greece and—

AE: Do you know where in Greece?

JC: Um, [short pause] my father's side of the family came from Sparta. And, uh, my mother's side came from, really Asia Minor, but there was a small Greek province there.

AE: Okay.

JC: And [they] later moved to Athens [Greece] and then cam here.

AE: And your parents were born in Birmingham, or in the states?

JC: My mother was born in Ohio. My father was born in Augusta, Georgia.

AE: Okay, and how did the family end up here [in Birmingham]?

JC: Uh, just through transfers that my dad—he was in sales and--in—moved to Atlanta and then we ended up here in Birmingham.

AE: Okay. And you talked about on Saturdays, going to the markets and stuff when you were young. Can you speak a little bit more to that?

JC: Um.

AE: What that was like?

JC: It was fun. I mean, it was, you know. You'd go to the market and there was food everywhere and you'd just walk around, and you got to eat stuff for free [laughs], you know. And it—w—when you're a little kid like that, it just kind of overwhelms you.

AE: Is this the Farmer's Market [short pause] that you're talking about?

JC: Yeah.

AE: And they had what kind of –

JC: Oh, they had everything! [Laughs]

AE: Yeah. Um, okay. And so, what was your first foray into the restaurant business as an adult?

JC: Um, [short pause] I think I started working at Sneaky Pete's [hot dog stand].

AE: Really?

JC: When I was in high school. Uh, I did—I did that on Fridays and Saturdays. Uh, and then when school was out in the summertime, I—I was there all the time. You know, I worked full-time during the summer as a summer job. Uh, [short pause] and just started getting jobs at different restaurants as I got older. Um—

AE: Other Greek-owned restaurants?

[Short pause]

JC: No, I worked for Frank Stitt for a little while at Highland's—

AE: Okay.

JC: --when he first opened up. I've worked for, uh, Steak & Ale. Uh, for General Mills. They had—they've had several different concepts. Uh, some fast food omelet shop kind of stuff . Um, and --and in—a lot of independents. And just—rather than going to culinary school, I—I learned that way.

AE: By experience.

JC: Yeah.

AE: Um, and who is—or was the owner of Sneaky Pete's , when you worked there?

JC: Uh, the Graphos family. [Pete Graphos]

AE: Okay. What was that like, working there?

JC: That was—

AE: Slinging hot dogs?

JC: That was fun.

AE: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

AE: Um, I've interviewed, um, Gus Koutroulakis over at Pete's Famous [hot dogs] and—

JC: Yeah.

AE: --George at Gus's Hot Dogs and, um—Can you speak a little bit to the tradition of hot dogs in Birmingham and Greek-owned hot dog stands?

JC: Uh [sighs]. That was the big thing back then. [Laughs] Um, you know, they used to say you got meat and two vegetables, which was onions and sauerkraut. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

JC: Um, it was something that was fast and—and I guess that craze has kind of worn off some. But there are still a few places open, you know. A—a good hot dog is—you can't beat it.

AE: Um-hmm. And what about that special sauce that everyone uses--or stains thereof?

JC: That's, uh, I think everybody's got their own sauce, and everybody wants to say theirs is better. Uh, but I know the Sneaky Pete's [sauce] now isn't anything like it used to be.

AE: Yeah. Well, and that's an interesting kind of thing that now you've come full-circle, where you now have this restaurant in Vestavia City Center, and I noticed there's a Sneaky Pete's café—

JC: Café, yeah.

AE: --right on the top of the hill there.

JC: Yeah, they've come a long way, since their little hot dog stand.

AE: [Laughs] Yeah, so what brought you, um, here to open this place?

JC: Uh, I had Justin's restaurant on Valleydale Road, um, and it was in a rundown shopping center. And they sold a third of the strip off to Walgreen's. Walgreen's came in and demolished it and—to build a fr—uh, uh—a drugstore, and it just—it affected business, and I had to close. I had to get out of there.

AE: What kind of restaurant was Justin's?

JC: Justin's was a casual steak and seafood. Uh, a little bit more oriented towards the family than—than Yanni's is. Um, [short pause] but I did a lot of upscale stuff that I do on—on a special board, and that's the kind of stuff I'm doing here.

AE: Um-hmm. And you opened here on—in August?

JC: August twentieth. Um-hmm, yeah. Of two-thousand fo—three.

AE: Okay, and what was your inspiration to do this, um, white tablecloth restaurant?

JC: Uh, [short pause] I just felt I had a menu that was a lot different than anything in town, and it fit [short pause] the space, as far as the white tablecloth and---and the food that would go on—on the table. Um, I've always liked taking Greek ingredients and fusing them with [short pause] anything.

AE: Um-hmm.

JC: Uh, and—and give it a Greek flair. Uh, and when I saw the place and decided I was going to put the columns in and stuff, it just kind of clicked.

AE: Um-hmm. And how did you develop your menu? Do—do you have a chef or are you—

JC: No. I'm—I create everything myself.

AE: Okay. Well, it's a beautiful menu. Can you speak about, um, some of the entrees that you offer and—I was here for brunch and had feta grits and salmon eggrolls, um, with tzaziki sauce.

JC: Um-hmm.

AE: Both very new and interesting, um—

JC: Combinations.

AE: Twists on the old—

JC: Yeah.

AE: --Greek fare but very contemporary, so I wonder how you came up with some of those—some other items that maybe you could name.

JC: Um, along the Greek-fusion lines, we take a—uh, filet mignon or basically a beef tenderloin and, uh, stuff it with feta cheese, marinate it in—basically, a Greek dressing with [phone rings] olive oil and oregano, [clears throat] and we serve it on, uh, a cold potato salad that's got, uh, Greek peppers and Greek olives and—and again, Greek dressing so—

AE: Um-hmm.

JC: --they compliment each other. Um, we do a chicken on mustard greens, uh, avgolemono sauce, which is a—and egg-lemon sauce. Normally, you would use that as a soup, avgolemono. Uh, it has chicken pieces in it and ice, and I just turned it into a sauce, leave the rice out and the chicken chunks. Um, we do a, uh, sautéed shrimp and squid with green tomatoes and feta grits. You--I—I like using the feta grits a lot. Um, personally, I don't care for grits.

AE: [Laughs]

JC: But with feta in there with it, it really changes the taste, and I can eat them. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] And has the menu been well-received by the patrons and--

JC: I think it has been very well received. Uh, I've got some other ideas and would like to change things up a little bit. Um, [short pause] I've got—I try to

stay with the Greek theme as much as I can, uh, wi—with—with Greek flair but, you know, anything Mediterranean, uh, I—I'm -I will use.

AE: Um-hmm. Um, well can we talk now about the décor? You mentioned you came in here and thought you were going to do columns and it fit the space, but everything else seems very classical with, again, a modern—

JC: Right.

AE: --twist.

JC: Well, that's why I'm calling it a, uh, a "nuovo grille."

AE: Uh-huh.

JC: Nuovo, to me, is where old meets new. Um, and I think it came off real good in here.

AE: Yeah, it definitely did. Definitely did. Very thoroughly, um, conceived, I think—the whole restaurant. Um, and you have ouzo [Greek anise-flavored liquor] I see at the bar—or, I actually had some on Sunday. Um, do you have Greek wines or anything?

JC: No. I haven't, um—I haven't really, uh, been able to find any good ones f--from any of the, uh, distributors in town. Um, but I would like to put a few on. I'm—Greek wines aren't—unless you're Greek and you grew up drinking them, they're—they're—sometimes they're hard to, uh, take. [Laughs]

AE: Yeah. And your meat and produce suppliers? Do you use anybody locally or any of the Greek produce companies?

JC: I use, uh—get a lot of stuff from, uh, Sarris Imports which is basically Tsitalia. Uh, he—he sells olive oil, feta, olives, a—a lot of Greek stuff.

AE: Um-hmm. I met with him on Monday. He's a good guy, George Sarris.

JC: Yeah.

AE: Um, have you been back to Greece or—

JC: No. I haven't.

AE: --ever visited?

JC: I have not.

AE: Um, as far as your family—when you were being raised in Birmingham, were you raised in the Greek Orthodox Church?

JC: Yes.

AE: Yeah? And went to Greek school?

JC: Uh, no. That was something I kind of fought. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

JC: You know. And I—and I regret it. Uh, but when you're young, you think you have all the answers.

AE: Um-hmm. Do you have kids now?

JC: I have two. [Nicholas and Nicole]

AE: Yeah? And how do they feel about their Greek heritage?

JC: Um, I think they're proud of it. Uh, [short pause] I haven't been as strong in the upbringing and—and made it's—as important as my parents did to me. Uh, but there's a lot of things to be proud of.

AE: Are your parents still living?

JC: Yes.

AE: And what do they think of your restaurant endeavors here?

JC: They—they like it a lot.

AE: Do they like the food?

JC: Yes.

AE: Yeah? And do you cook at home?

JC: Uh, I'm not at home very much. Uh, [short pause] No, I don't cook a lot at home. Uh, [short pause] it's hard to go home. Wh—when I get home I just want to—

AE: Um-hmm.

JC: --chill out.

AE: And how did you come up with the name Yanni's for the restaurant?

JC: Yanni's is "John" in Greek.

AE: Okay.

JC: So I basically used my name in—in the Greek form.

AE: Perfect. Well, do you have any, um, thoughts about the Greek community in general—in Birmingham. It's such a rich heritage here.

JC: It's a very rich heritage. Um, yeah, it's like a big family.

[Short pause]

AE: Okay, any final thoughts?

JC: No. [Laughs] I think that's it. [Laughs]

AE: Okay. I appreciate your time.

JC: Thank you.

AE: Thank you.

[END]