

GUS'S HOT DOGS

1915 4th Avenue North
Birmingham, AL 35203
(205) 251-4540

"In Chicago they have different style [of hot dog]. They put [them] in the water,[and] they put mustard, onions, tomatoes and pickles and, uh, relish. Stuff like that. And, uh, in the southern—the southern states like here, we have different. But here is better because they cook with a grill, you know?"

—George Nasiakos

Gus Alexander, a native of Greece, opened Gus's Hot Dogs, sometime in the late 1940s. Alex Choraitis (current owner of Andrew's Bar-B-Q) took the place over in the 1960s, when Gus and his wife returned to live in Greece. Then, George Nasiakos took it over soon after his arrival to Birmingham in 1997. George came to Birmingham from Tripolis, Greece, via Chicago, where he worked at his brother's restaurant, Chris's Grill. Aleck Choraitis recruited George from Chicago, where their brothers knew each other, so that he could concentrate on his barbecue business. The hot dogs served at Gus's are your typical Birmingham fare: a grilled dog with mustard, onions, and the elusive special sauce. The sauce recipe used there today is the original concoction that Gus Alexander created and then sold to Aleck and later George. George says he's added his own touch to the sauce in the intervening years. No matter, it's still one of the best dogs to be found in the Magic City.

Full Interview Transcription:

George Nasiakos, Owner
GUS'S HOT DOGS
1915 4th Avenue North
Birmingham, AL 35203
(205) 251-4540

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
DATE: March 9, 2004 @ 4:00 p.m.
LOCATION: Counter stools along wall.
LENGTH: Approx. 22 minutes

NOTE: Mr. Nasiakos has a heavy Greek accent, so much of the text in this transcript is reflective of his broken English. The constant hum of the vent hood in Gus's Hot Dogs can be heard throughout the interview, and Mr. Nasiakos's jewelry can be heard jangling at moments throughout the interview as well. **See Aleck Choraitis interview for more information on Gus's Hot Dogs.**

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Amy Evans: This is Tuesday, March ninth, two thousand and four. And I'm on Fourth Avenue at Gus's Hot Dogs with George Nasiakos [pronounced *Nah-see-ah-gose*]. And George, if you would say your name and, if you don't mind, your birthdate for the record.

George Nasiakos: Uh, when is—birth—birthday, you say?

AE: Yes, sir.

GN: Okay. [Short pause] So.

AE: When is your birthday?

GN: Uh, July fourteen, nineteen-forty.

AE: Nineteen forty. And you said you're from Chicago?

GN: Yes.

AE: Did you come to Chicago from Greece or where you born there?

GN: Yes, I came, uh, June thirteen, uh, nineteen seventy-four from Greece to Chicago.

AE: Where in Greece are you from?

GN: Uh, south Greece. [Short pause] The part is, uh, Peloponnesus. The city is, uh, Tripolis.

AE: Okay, and what took you to Chicago?

[Short pause]

AE: Why did you go to Chicago?

GN: What I did there?

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Uh, to begin with I work in the small restaurant. And after that I –I had business—uh, paint business.

AE: Oh, really?

GN: Yeah.

AE: Was the restaurant, um, Greek-owned?

GN: Yeah, my brother's.

AE: Your brother's restaurant.

GN: Yeah.

AE: What was it called?

GN: Uh, Chris's Grill. Small restaurant, yeah.

AE: Kristo's Grill?

GN: Chris—Chris Grill.

AE: Chris's Grill.

GN: Yeah.

AE: Okay. And then you owned a paint store—paint shop?

[Short pause]

GN: Not shop but, uh—

AE: Store.

GN: Yeah—individual, you know what I mean. We know a lot of people and so there--they call us, and we paint restaurants, uh, houses—

AE: Okay.

GN: --something like that.

AE: And then what brought you to Birmingham?

GN: When I came?

AE: Yes, sir.

GN: I came, uh, March twenty-three, nineteen, eh, uh [short pause] ninety-six, I think. If I remember. Six—No, nineteen--nineteen ninety-seven, something like that. Yeah.

AE: And what did you do when you first arrived?

[Short pause]

AE: What job did you have when you first arrived?

GN: Here?

AE: To Birmingham. Yes, sir.

GN: Here!

AE: At Gus's Hot Dogs?

GN: Yeah.

AE: Okay. And you worked here and then you purchased the business? From the owner?

GN: No.

AE: No?

GN: I live with him for a—about ten months. With [the owner of] Andrew's Bar-B-Q, you know? And after that I came here as long--I bought it, and I learned the job here.

AE: Okay. So you worked at Andrew's Bar-B-Q, which is owned by Aleck Choraitis?

GN: Yeah. Not really. Not, uh, like, uh—just help, you know what I mean?

AE: Sure.

GN: Yeah.

AE: Okay. And then you bought this place when?

GN: Right. Uh, [short pause] I came here, uh, June first, uh, nineteen ninety-seven.

AE: And you've owned it since then?

GN: This place?

AE: Yes, Gus's Hot Dogs.

GN: Yeah.

AE: Okay. Do you like the hot dog business?

GN: I like it.

AE: Yeah?

GN: Yeah.

AE: [Short laugh] What do you like about it?

GN: Because I have nothing better to do. [Short laugh]

AE: [Laughs] Do you have, um, a favorite way to serve your hot dog? I heard your customer before say you have a special sauce.

GN: The sauce, uh—uh [long pause] they sold to me. How I mix--because I had idea.

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Before. But, uh, and after that, I change a little bit by my own, uh, recipe.

AE: So they showed you their recipe, but then you changed it according to your—

GN: Yeah.

AE: --taste.

GN: They sold to me the recipe, but I change it.

AE: Okay. How did you change it?

GN: Uh, before they make it, uh—little hot. So--they put a lot of spices in. But I had—I hearing a lot of people say, "Too hot, too hot!" Like complain. They don't say nothing bad but, "Too hot, too hot!" And I thought that the people don't like that. And I changed it, and now I have lot of compliments. Lot of people likes.

AE: Yeah?

GN: Yeah.

AE: Had you ever seen a hot dog with this kind of sauce on it before you came to Birmingham?

GN: In Chicago they have different style.

AE: Yeah. Very different.

GN: Yeah. They put in the water, they put mustard, onions, tomatoes and pickles and, uh, relish. Stuff like that. And, uh, in the southern—the southern states like here, we have different. But here is better because they cook with a grill, you know?

AE: Sure.

GN: It's not in the water. Yeah, that's all that's different.

AE: Do you know—

GN: And they—and they put a lot of stuff in here, you know? They make a chili, beef, slaw.

AE: Did you know anyone in the hot dog business in Chicago?

[Short pause]

AE: In Chicago did you know anyone who sold hot dogs?

GN: Me? No. Never. Friend of mine, he has a hot dog business. But not me.

AE: Yeah. Um, because it seems that there are a lot of Greeks who have hot dog stands here in Birmingham.

GN: No, here, uh, just, uh, two people I know—three people I know. Yeah. The other, uh, they have restaurants.

AE: Um-hmm. How can you explain all the Greeks owning restaurants?

GN: Because when, uh—we came here from, uh, our—old--old country [short pause] Usually they go to work back to—to kitchen, you know what I mean? So they start to plates--dishes, this and that and after that they're grill mens, they start step by step and, uh, open a small restaurant and after too many years, they open a big restaurants. Because in Chicago—lot of people—they have lot of Greeks. They have, uh, restaurants.

[Short pause]

AE: And did you come to the United States to work and stay?

GN: Yeah. I—I came a legal here—

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Because before I came here, uh, my father [John Nasiakos] was here nineteen, uh—sixty-seven. So and he fill out the paper. He sent the paper there [to Greece], you know? And after that I came legal here.

AE: Your father was in Birmingham? Or in—

GN: No, no. In Chicago.

AE: Okay.

GN: For couple of years.

AE: Okay.

GN: Yeah. I have, uh, two brothers, one sister in Chicago too.

AE: And have you been back to Greece since you've been here?

GN: I just—one time I went because, um, my mum was sick. And before she passed, I saw her.

AE: Yeah. So this—you showed me a key chain there that says that, um, this place celebrated it's fifty-fifth anniversary recently?

GN: Yeah, that's all I—see?

[George hands me the key chain to look at again]

AE: Yeah, Gus's Hot Dogs. So do you know anything, um, about Gus Alexander who opened this place?

GN: No, I have, uh—I have, uh—I have nothing information about him.

AE: Yeah.

GN: Yeah. Possible he—he passed, you know what I mean? So, that's all I say to you. Ask Aleck. Aleck, he remember him, you know?

AE: Right.

GN: So—and I—possible he know better than me for better information.

AE: Are they related?

GN: Me and Aleck?

AE: No, Aleck and Gus.

GN: No!

AE: Okay.

GN: No! But Aleck, he has, uh, forty-five years in business here. You know?

AE: Yeah.

GN: So—

AE: And now he's in the barbecue business.

GN: Right.

AE: [Laughs] That's interesting.

GN: Yeah, on the First Avenue.

AE: Yeah. So do you have many employees here?

GN: No. Just, uh—just one person, you know what I mean. Part-time.

AE: Uh-huh. Is that Patsy?

GN: Few times--few hours. Not—not much, you know?

AE: Is that Patsy, whom I met?

GN: Patsy, yeah.

AE: Yeah. She's nice.

GN: Patsy, she bought it today—they make her work—her husband, uh, closed a deal and they open a small restaurant in Cullman [city north of Birmingham].

AE: Really? Is Patsy Greek?

GN: No.

AE: Oh, okay.

GN: She's—she's from here.

AE: Okay.

GN: Yeah. Her—her husband too.

AE: Okay.

GN: Yeah.

AE: Well, what do you think about the Greek community here in Birmingham?

[Short pause]

GN: It's all right.

AE: Do you attend the Holy Trinity Holy Cross [Greek Orthodox Church]?

GN: Yeah, that's all, uh—I met a lot of people there, you know? Just in the church.

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Yeah. And it's some people who—for the holidays, you know, Like Aleck's house—we go there and some other friends—yeah.

AE: Are there still a lot of people in the Greek community here who speak Greek? It seems like there are.

GN: Usually, the people—uh, the Greeks—uh, came from Greece, they speak Greek. Uh, the American Greeks that born here, uh, some people they--they speak. Some people very broke[n] like me. [Short laugh] How I speak English, you know? So—not, uh, not like me, you know? So, I have a friend, his name, uh, Jim Likis. He speak perfect Greek language.

AE: Yeah.

GN: He's born here but, uh, he speak, uh, excellent. He was yesterday here, I think. So you saw him.

AE: I don't remember.

GN: Oh, possible not.

AE: Okay. [Short laugh] So did you ever think that you would be in the hot dog business?

GN: UAB? [University of Alabama at Birmingham]

AE: Did you think ever that you would be here in the hot dog business?

GN: [Laughs] No.

AE: [Laughs] What were you doing in Greece before you left?

GN: Uh, paint business.

AE: In Greece also?

GN: Yeah.

AE: Okay.

GN: I—I finish in a technical school in Athens.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: For three years.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: And so I finished, I went back to small city. Usually I'm from small village but, uh, my house—my father's house in the city that's just, uh, six miles far away, you know. Work all over the places over there. Yeah.

AE: Do you miss it?

[Short pause]

AE: Do you miss Greece?

GN: I tell you, yes. Because, uh, the place you're born in there, you know what I mean, you have memories. Yeah. Just one time after, uh, nineteen seventy-four—after nineteen seventy-four I came here—just one time I went back. But now I feel, uh—because, uh, you know I—I feel to live forever here, you know. So —so—you know how you feel if you live, uh—if you live in one place and you lived for many years in the other place, you love the place, you know? You know what I'm saying?

AE: Yes.

GN: Yeah. That's all happened to me.

AE: So you like Birmingham.

GN: I like it, uh, Chicago is good city. Big city. Eh, but I like it, uh, better here, uh—the weather. I don't like the cold, you know.

AE: Yeah.

GN: I have problem with the cold weather. And, eh, I think people is more friendly, I think, here. You know? Usually, the big cities, you know, the people, they go fast and here is, uh, smaller city and I--I know lot of people. Yeah, the people is good.

AE: Yeah.

GN: Yeah. Very nice people. My brother came from Chicago and he—he saw that. He talking about these—these people is more friendly here than Chicago.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: He told me from the -the—the—second day.

AE: Yeah?

GN: Because he stay outside and everybody say, "Good morning! How are you?" You know? Yeah.

[Short pause]

AE: So you have, um, a counter here, I notice, with seats. Do you have—are you really crowded at lunch? Do people sit down and—and eat with you?

GN: I have uh, here, uh, just a [looks to count the stools] six, seven—how many—two, four, six, eight stools.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: Yeah, sometimes, uh, they come sit--once. You know, the small place here. And if it is ten, fifteen people, it's full house, you know? [Laughs]

AE: Um-hmm. Sure.

GN: Yeah. Uh, if we have bad weather—rain or cold—uh, not a lot of people. Yeah.

AE: Do you know Gus Koutroulakis over at Pete's Famous?

GN: Yeah, I know him. Yeah, I know him. He's very good man.

AE: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

GN: Yes, I know him.

[Phone rings]

GN: I think he came from, uh, a—couple, two years old. I don't know. I don't know exactly, but he came from Greece, I think. [Phone still ringing]

AE: Yeah. Do you want to answer that? We can pause this.

[George takes the call, speaking in Greek the entire time. The call only takes a couple of minutes, and we are back to the interview.]

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING CONTINUES]

GN: Yeah, he has lot of—

AE: Okay.

GN: --too many years there, I think. [Still talking about Gus Koutroulakis]

AE: He's been there a long time.

GN: Yeah.

AE: Over fifty years he's been—

GN: Over fifty years, yes.

AE: --serving hot dogs.

GN: Yes.

AE: It's an amazing thing, the hot dog tradition here. [Laughs]

[Short pause]

AE: Are you married?

GN: No.

AE: No, you're single?

GN: No. Unfortunately, no.

AE: Yeah. So did—um, how long do you intend to stay here making hot dogs?

GN: How long I will stay more?

AE: Yes, sir.

[Short pause]

GN: I don't know. Not—not too long.

AE: No?

GN: Two, three years. I don't know.

AE: Yeah?

GN: Maybe more.

AE: And then--

GN: Maybe less.

AE: And then retire?

GN: Yeah. The—the time came, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: All depend—my—so far, I'm, uh—I feel okay, you know what I mean? I, uh, never sick so—I don't know, tomorrow maybe something happen to me, you know what I mean?

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: So—

[Short pause]

AE: Well how many hot dogs do you think you serve in a day?

[Short pause]

GN: Usually, hundred fifty hot dogs. Sometimes two hundred, you know what I mean. The busy time. You know?

AE: Yeah.

GN: Uh, sometimes, uh, less than hundred fifty, you know.

AE: How—what's the most popular way to get a hot dog? Most popular way to order the hot dog. All the way or with—

GN: Oh, special, uh—usually they—they get the chili and special.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: And, uh, a lot of cole slaw but, uh, chili and special. Everything of course, but they like a chili and special.

AE: Okay.

GN: Special is that the—the same beef as I use, uh—I use, uh, quality beef. I don't—I don't buy, uh, ground beef, you know.

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Because the ground beef is it a lot of fat in. You know that. So, for example, sirloin is it, uh, more lean.

AE: Sirloin? Yes.

GN: Yeah. Uh [short pause] Anyway, the people likes, you know what I mean?

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Yeah.

AE: And you serve breakfast also?

GN: Yeah, but not much. Not much.

AE: Yeah.

GN: No. I—I serve, uh-I have, uh, bacon, I have, uh, ham, I have a bologna. But, uh, not much breakfast.

AE: What are your hours here?

GN: Uh, I be here seven o'clock and, eh [short pause] I close, uh—I close, uh, five o'clock. Yeah.

AE: And your—

GN: But, uh, after that I—after that I have lot of things to do.

AE: Yeah.

GN: Sweep, mop, wash the pots, you know what I mean? I put the stuff for the, uh, next day. Because, uh, in the morning it's not easy for me, you know?

AE: Yeah. And are you open every day?

GN: Uh, usually it's five days.

AE: Okay.

GN: Uh, Monday through Friday. But I'm open Saturdays ten to three-thirty. But, uh, Saturdays no business.

AE: Yeah.

GN: But Saturday I have, uh, more job than the other days. Because I have rub the hood for example, or—e—everything, you know. I clean up every day, but Saturday or Sunday sometimes too, you know? And besides that, some people some here will--because everything here [in downtown] is everything closed, you know? Some people, they stop here. Usually not worth it to come here special for business, you know?

AE: Yeah.

GN: But I spend all day long here. And besides that, whatever—whatever I do. But not business, no.

AE: Yeah. Well, what is your favorite thing about running a hot dog stand?

[Short pause]

AE: Your favorite thing about running this place?

[Short pause]

GN: Tell me again.

AE: Do—do you have s—a favorite thing about running this hot dog stand? Something you like about it. [Short pause] Especially.

GN: It means? Because I don't understand.

AE: Do you enjoy—what do you enjoy most about having this place?

GN: Oh! With people!

AE: Yeah.

GN: Yeah. Yeah, I like the people.

AE: You have lots of regular customers?

GN: Yes. Yes.

AE: And, um, how many hot dogs is the most hot dogs someone has had at one time here? Do you know?

GN: The people? One, two.

AE: Yeah?

GN: Yeah. Sometimes, eh, some people they need it to go, you know. Three, four, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: But usually, one or two.

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Yeah. Because the people work in the offices—here. Around here. And they take one hot dog and they drink a Coca-Cola, and they go for lunch—for dinner—uh, I don't know where. In house, restaurants, I don't know.

AE: Do you cook at home?

GN: Me? Yes.

AE: Yes.

GN: Because I live by myself, and I cook.

AE: Yes?

GN: Yeah [Laughs]

AE: What do you cook at home?

GN: I cook some, uh [short pause] Some Greek stuff, you know what I mean?

AE: Uh-huh. Like what?

GN: Uh, Greek chicken with, uh, potatoes Greek—Greek-style chicken and—

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: --potatoes, uh, some, uh, vegetables, uh [short pause] Just like that.

AE: Yeah.

GN: But I don't—I don't—I don't cook much because I don't eat too much, you know what I mean? Sometimes I eat every—once a day. Some times every two days, you know?

AE: Yeah?

GN: Yeah.

AE: Do you ever eat many hot dogs while you're working?

GN: Uh, here sometimes I eat. Usually, uh, all day long I don't eat nothing.

AE: Yeah.

GN: Yeah. Except, uh, I drink sweet tea. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] You like the sweet tea?

GN: I like it. I don't drink pops.

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: No. No. I never drink. But I like the sweet tea.

AE: Yeah? What do you think about the rest of the Southern food here?

[Short pause]

AE: The southern style of cooking? Do you like that?

[Short pause]

AE: The food in Birmingham?

GN: Oh, in the southern?

AE: Yes, sir.

GN: Yeah, they have a different, uh, style of food here. Yeah. [Short pause] The barbecue is okay. I like it, barbecue.

AE: Uh-huh?

GN: Yes. Because they cook on, uh, on the wood, you know.

AE: Uh-huh.

GN: Uh, they have, uh, fresh greens. Like, eh, turnip greens and, uh, collard greens. Yes. I have a lot of beans. [Short pause] I like get fish too.

AE: Um-hmm.

GN: I got to go to Fish Market Restaurant, you know?

AE: Um-hmm. I was there yesterday.

GN: Yeah.

AE: Yeah.

GN: His name George too.

AE: Yes.

GN: Yeah.

AE: You're friends with George Sarris?

GN: Yeah, yeah. He my friend, yeah.

AE: He's a good man.

GN: Very nice. Very nice. Yes. He has been many years here, you know.

AE: Yeah.

GN: He came young guy here.

AE: Well do you think you'll travel back to Greece any time?

GN: I like to go back to see because I have two brothers and one sister there.

AE: Oh, really.

GN: Not too many relatives but, uh, some, uh—the family, I have two brothers, one sister. Yeah. I miss them, you know what I mean.

AE: Yeah.

GN: After too many years.

AE: Sure!

GN: Yeah.

AE: And do they not want to come to America?

GN: I—my youngest brother—he came, uh, [short pause] I think twenty, uh, years ago. He came. He works in the National Bank of Greece there. He finish the economics school—university of economics, something like that, you know? And, uh, he works, uh, in a—the small city now. Yeah. He has good position there.

AE: Yeah? Well, is there anything you'd like to add--about your hot dog stand?

GN: I'm sorry?

AE: Anything you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

GN: Add?

AE: Yes, sir.

GN: It means? Tell me.

AE: Um, anything else you'd like to say.

[Short pause]

AE: [Laughs] No?

[Short pause]

GN: I don't know. [Laughs]

AE: Okay. Okay. Well, we can end there. Thank you for your time, sir.

GN: You like to put something in, uh, for the end? Do it, you know.

AE: Okay.

GN: Because—

[END]