

SUREKHA “SUE” PATEL
London Sizzler – Houston, TX

* * *

Date: June 18, 2014
Location: London Sizzler – Houston, TX
Interviewer: Amy C. Evans
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 39 minutes
Project: Houston’s Underbelly

[Begin Sue Patel—London Sizzler Interview]

00:00:02

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Wednesday, June 18, 2014. I'm in Houston, Texas, at London Sizzler restaurant. And I'm with Mrs. Patel, Ajay's mother, whom I interviewed yesterday. And Mrs. Patel, if I could get you to say your full name for the record and also describe what your role is here at London Sizzler.

00:00:25

Surekha Patel: Surekha Patel. My full role here is, hmm, part owner [*Laughs*], everything really. I'm, you know, what I would call a general dog's body—everything, a bit of everything but mainly in the kitchen.

00:00:43

AE: Right. And I could—if I could get you to quickly share your birth date for the record?

00:00:47

SP: August 28, 1958.

00:00:49

AE: You have a birthday next month. Happy Birthday. All right. So I visited with Ajay yesterday, and he gave a little bit of family background and talked about how the restaurant, but I'd be curious if you would share your experiences a little bit. He told me that you were born in

London and grew up in a restaurant family. Could you speak to that a little bit—your experiences?

00:01:12

SP: I was—I was born in London, and my father owned a restaurant in London, but I never went there to do anything apart from eat. I never did anything and, actually, sometimes I even sit and think to myself, I amaze myself because I got married when I was eighteen. I could barely boil an egg. I never cooked. My mom was always at home so she always cooked. And she loved cooking, and she loved feeding us and making new stuff. And I never was interested at all.

00:01:43

And when I got married, my father-in-law, they have the sweet shop, so they're also in the food business. And that's when I developed a passion for food. I went there and, you know, there's like old Indian traditions, customs, where you have to take care of your in-laws and, you know, cook for them and do all that stuff. I have an older sister-in-law, so she was—so between us, I mean, she taught me everything. But like I said, I couldn't even boil rice. I couldn't make a boiled egg, which is, you know, you put a timer on ten minutes, and it's boiled. But no, I didn't know because I never did it.

00:02:21

But they—they insisted—part of their thing, was that by eleven o'clock, lunch had to be ready, so one of us had to go upstairs and cook and get everything ready because, you know, 11:30, they'd be there to eat. And it was like—I was like thrown into the deep end to cook, and that's when it all started developing from there.

00:02:42

AE: So who did the cooking at your family's restaurant?

00:02:45

SP: My dad had chefs, and my dad was in the back as well, but I had no idea what he was doing, what he was making, what went into what. That's it. I just know what favorites I had over there, and that's what I'd eat.

00:02:58

AE: What were your favorites?

00:03:01

SP: The lamb samosa and his tandoori chicken. And his chicken curry. It was fantastic. Gorgeous.

00:03:10

AE: Are there some things that you remember from there that you try to recreate here?

00:03:14

SP: The *samosa* [fried or baked pastry with a savory filling]. Yeah, the *samosa*. I've, you know, tried to recreate over here, but we've had to use different flours and, you know, there's slight differences, but we've tried to get it as close as we possibly can.

00:03:28

AE: Well, could you describe your *samosa* for me because the other day Ajay was making it clear to me that your—your dough and wrapping is so different from other *samosas*. Could you talk about that?

00:03:39

SP: As in—?

00:03:41

AE: That it's not as doughy; it stays crisper longer.

00:03:45

SP: Yeah, well—yeah, the—the flour, the tortillas that we make, yeah. We add [*Laughs*] certain things to it, so when it's fried it's really crispy. It stays crispy; it just doesn't go soggy. And even if it's like left out for thirty minutes, it'll go cold, but it will still be crispy.

00:04:06

AE: How did you come to call it a tortilla?

00:04:09

SP: Well, it's actually a *chapati*, but *chapati* is the same as a tortilla, right? Nice and big and thin. So that's why we just called it a tortilla. It's easier to explain, I think. That was one thing that when we came here, the Americans hadn't been introduced to Indian true terms. Actually, the name of the restaurant when we opened it, it was called London's Tandoori Bar & Grill. People didn't know what the word *Tandoori* meant, so we had to change the sign. And that's

why now it says *Indian Bar & Grill*, because a lot of people would say, “What’s Tandoori? What’s Tandoori? What’s Tandoori?” They didn’t know.

00:04:48

AE: Even in this part of Houston that is now the Mahatma Gandhi District?

00:04:50

SP: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Indians like, obviously, because it’s their, you know, their staple diet, so they know, but for Americans, they didn’t—they didn’t know. We had to introduce it to them and explain it to them, so we—we had to come up with some sort of comparison, you know. That’s why we used the word tortilla because they were used—they were more used to Mexican food, so they were used to it, you know.

00:05:17

AE: Meet people where they are. So that reminds me, the other day—the first day I met you and we walked through the kitchen with Chris Shepherd, your husband had just purchased an electric tortilla press. Do you know about that? For the—I guess for the *chapati*. Do you know—?

00:05:32

SP: It was a surprise. [*Laughs*] That was my surprise. That’s what he does, he gets things. He got that—one is for the tortillas yeah, but there’s two or three things, because you can make like little—the *puris* [unleavened deep-fried bread] you can make in there as well, so he got that for us because we go through a lot of *puri*, and you know it takes a long, long time to roll.

Sometimes there's three, four of us rolling. And that's actually for next door [at London Snacks & Sweets] because we don't sell the *puri* in the restaurant.

00:06:00

AE: Well and the women back there, when Ajay was asking me about it, said they weren't going to use it. They said it just wasn't the same.

00:06:05

SP: No, we did use it. We've used it every day since he bought it, but that speaks for itself because the machine that he bought before, that we haven't used. We only used it for like ten minutes, and now it's just sitting there. That's why Ajay said that because he gets—he—he, you know, he wants to make life easier for us, so that when we're working anything—so long as it's the quality is still the same, that life is a little bit easier for us—.

00:06:30

AE: Well, speaking of life being easier for you, tell me about his invitation to bring you both here, you and your husband.

00:06:37

SP: Ajay always said that you work far too hard. When we were in London, we worked really hard and to a point he is—is right. You know, we're—we're here. Most of the day, we are here, but we don't work half as hard as we used to. When we first opened, yes, until we could get people trained and, you know, taught them everything that we knew. We opened up, and we

started it. So for the first, maybe year, year and a half, we really did put in the hours and everything.

00:07:05

But now we don't anymore.

00:07:09

AE: So you went—well first, before I forget, I want to ask you the name of your family's restaurant in London and is it still in existence?

00:07:17

SP: My father's restaurant, it was called Natraj, and it is still in existence, but it's under another name because he sold it years ago.

00:07:29

AE: And then the—the restaurant that—or the snack shop that you and your husband have, the name of that?

00:07:36

SP: Ajay's Sweet Mart [*Laughs*], very simple. That—that has, actually, just been sold. It was Ajay's up until last month. And yes, it did—it was exactly how he left it, but last month it got sold, and they're turning it into a burger bar now.

00:07:55

AE: Well, and I've been warned that I may get some conflicting stories from you in comparison to my interview with your son yesterday, but he told me that he was a handful when he was young and wasn't necessarily allowed in the kitchen. And here you are, owning a restaurant with him.

00:08:13

SP: Hmm. He's—he's one of these children that doesn't—you buy him a toy. He doesn't like to play with it. He just wants to take it apart, you know, dismantle it, and then he doesn't know how to put it back together again. So anything—anything that we ever bought him—the same with the food—he has to try everything. And if we're like, well, you know, "No, you can't—." Because we used to live above the actual sweet shop, so in the mornings, when we're making the hot snacks, you know, he'd go down. And I'm like, you know what? It's not healthy to eat this fried food. You need to have your cereal and toast, but he'd still go in there and do it behind my back. But he was a handful, yes. And as—as a toddler, as a baby, like, when he was one, two it's like, you know, I always had to have eyes in the back of my head. It's just, he was—the girls were really good, but Ajay [*Laughs*], he was just—he was just bad. He was bad. But he turned out to be really good. [*Laughs*]

00:09:10

AE: So how—how is your working relationship now, being a family-owned business with your son?

00:09:15

SP: It's—it's fine. It's really good because he—he—he doesn't have a passion for making food. You know, only on occasional—I mean, there's a couple of dishes on the menu that he has actually himself introduced, but he just wanted to learn, he was like dribbling, dabbling and he just came up with this one dish and it was really, really good and, actually, it's on the menu, and it's a really good seller. But other than that, on a day-to-day basis, he does not like to be in the kitchen. He is not passionate about food.

00:09:42

AE: What is the dish that he came up with?

00:09:44

SP: The Special Mogo. That dish—he came up with that, the Special Mogo [cassava dish].

00:09:50

AE: Could you describe it for me?

00:09:52

SP: It's—it's *mogo* and there's just—it's made with a soy sauce base, and it's got jalapeños and um, Serrano [pepper], cilantro, do you know what? I don't even know everything that it's got in there. But it is very nice. It's very tasty. It is tasty.

00:10:12

AE: So that's another thing that I was so intrigued with in our conversation yesterday is kind of being here and this traditional homemade Indian food, and you do so much to make things from

scratch and work so hard to do that, but then kind of this mash-up of American food and American just kind of pop culture, you know, and the brownie dessert and the nachos and kind of this blending of American—iconic American food and his tastes with Indian food, yeah.

00:10:45

SP: Yeah, well with the nachos and that, it's something that we actually used to enjoy eating at home and you know—and then we just—it was my husband that came up with this idea and he said, you know what? Because it's one of these things that families like. And I think that's what—it's not—it's more family orientated than it is business. And I think that's why we came up with that, and we'd put *chicken tikka* on there and just give it the Indian twist.

00:11:14

A lot of our food is actually basic Indian food, basic homemade food that, you know, my mom would—used to make or my mother-in-law used to make or my sister-in-law made and we just—we've tweaked them and give them a slight—you know, different flavors. That's basically what it is.

00:11:32

AE: Do you remember the first thing that your mother-in-law taught you how to make?

00:11:38

SP: Proper rice. She did, because I made rice, and I mean, you know, you think, how can anybody make a mess up of rice, but I did. **[Laughs]** I really did, so she's like, you know, she said, “Look, this is how you do it, and this is how you boil it.” And I stood there, and I kept checking the grains until it was ready. And she said, “It takes eight minutes.” I'm like, “Eight

minutes?” And she’s like, “Yeah, eight minutes, and that’s how you do it.” My mother-in-law was actually very strict. And at the time, I used to—I used to think, oh, you know. But as the years went on I realized if she hadn’t been, I probably wouldn’t have learned, and I probably wouldn’t have discovered my passion. So in a way, I’m thankful that she was as strict as she was.

00:12:24

AE: Do you remember the first meal that you cooked on your own that you were really proud of to show off to her or your husband or both?

00:12:30

SP: I do. It was a full-on traditional Indian meal, *Gujarati* [relating to the western Indian state of Gujarat] meal: dal, rice with cabbage and okra and sweet and everything. And I made it—because we actually used to live on our own. We didn’t live with my in-laws. We spent all day with them, but we didn’t actually live there. So we lived in another house, and I made the whole meal. And I remember inviting my mother- and father-in-law, and all four of us sat down and ate. And my mother-in-law was saying, “Oh, this is not right. Oh, this is not right.” And my—I remember, to this day, my father-in-law said, “You know what? You did really well. We’re really proud of you.” Because I did everything from scratch. And the certain masalas that, you know, if you make a home like the cilantro, the seeds? If you make the powder at home, it’s completely whereas if you buy it from outside they mix it with other things, *jeera*—cumin powder—if you—we do our own here. But when you powder it on its own here, and you buy it from outside, you can tell the difference. The taste you can tell.

00:13:33

And because, you know, I didn't know, so I bought everything ready-made from outside and—but I remember he was so proud of me, and so was my husband because it took a lot. But I think that's when I realized that, you know what, I can do this. And then I used to just try different things and add different things. And like I was showing Chris [Shepherd of Underbelly restaurant] when we went for a couple of months, Chris had this event and he made something. And he said, you know, "Mama, taste this." And I tasted, and he says like, "Okay now, fix it." And he got me this—the whole pot. I said, "Put the pot down on the floor. Put it low down." Because it was really high up, and it was a lot. You know, it's like a really big pot, really big and he said, "Fix it, Mama." And I said, "No." I said, "Give me a little bowl." And he's like looking at me, and I said, "Just give me a bowl."

00:14:18

So I got a little bowl and put a little bit in there and then added what I needed to add in there, and I said, "Okay, now taste this." And he said, "Just put it in." I said, "No, you've got to taste it because you don't know. It's no point in messing the whole pot up is it? Just take a little bit and taste it." And that's what I've used to doing. I've always done that. Even to this day, I still do it. I take a little bit out, put a pinch of this, and a pinch of that—whatever and mix it, and taste it. It's perfect. Okay, now go for the big kill.

00:14:43

AE: [*Laughs*] Now is this—this is for the Off the Wall Dinner that Chris Shepherd did? Was that the curry?

00:14:50

SP: Yeah. Yeah, that's what he was talking about the other day, but I said, you know, he is the one that did it all. He initiated it all. He did everything. He started everything. He just wanted me to taste it. But, you know, there's a few things that were lacking in there, and so I think it's just—there's certain Indian flavor, and when I told him one of them, he started looking at me like—and I said, “Yes, that's what is lacking in there. You put that in there, and you'll see a complete difference.”

00:15:15

AE: Would you share what that is?

00:15:17

SP: [*Laughs*] It was actually *garam masala* [a special blend of spices]. It was *garam masala*.
[Interviewer's note: After the interview, Mrs. Patel said that garam masala was not actually the secret ingredient. She just wanted to give me an answer.]

00:15:25

AE: Yeah. And he was joking the other day that you said you doctored it up, and he said no, you gave it a transplant. [*Laughs*]

00:15:31

SP: Yeah, that's what he was trying—and he told everybody in the evening when he was talking to everybody he was saying that, “Yeah, she's just performed surgery on it.” But no, I hadn't. It was—it was garbanzo beans with beef vindaloo. That's what he had made.

00:15:50

AE: And I think, if you remember correctly, he was telling me at a different conversation about how much spice you put in there, and he was nervous it was going to be too hot, but you just said, “No, wait and see.”

00:16:00

SP: Yeah. Yeah, he was. That’s why I said to him that we need to do the little bowl test first because, you know, the thing is, it’s like when you smell perfume. You have to smell coffee, otherwise it all smells the same, right. The same with food. Once you taste it, twice you taste it—after that, it all just tastes the same, and you’ll just keep saying, “Okay, it needs this, this, this.” So if you can do it the first, time then, you know, you’ve hit it. Otherwise, it’ll just keep tasting—it doesn’t matter what you put in there and how much you put in it, it will still taste the same.

00:16:28

AE: Now you—you all have known Chris for a handful of years now. Tell me about getting to know him and what that’s like with now this kind of him learning from you and—and if you learned from him.

00:16:40

SP: I do. We do, you know. It’s—it’s really—it—it’s really unusual, actually. I mean, you know, it just happened. And you know, we just formed a bond. He came here; he got to know Ajay first. And then Ajay introduced us to him and that’s it. Like ever since then we’ve you know—we’ve just got to know each other and bonded and you know it’s—it’s a deep—it’s a

deep feeling, a deep relationship. It's not—it's not one of well, he's got this business or we've got this business. It's—business doesn't come into it at all. It's just, you know, like how you get to know somebody, and you want to bring out the best in them. Or, you know, when—and you bring out the best in them and they—he gets praised. He makes you feel good. And I really do feel good when he gets praised, like that night I was just—he was like telling me—and he said, “I'm going to put you on the spot.” I said, “Don't put me on the spot.” Many times he's been here with food critics, and he'll come in the back and say—and I'll say, “You know what? Don't—don't bring me—I don't want to come in the front. I'm not—I'm a background person. I don't like limelight.” And he's like, No, no, no.” A couple of times he's lied to me, and he'll just ask me, he'll say, “Hey, Mama, I need to show you something.” I'll come out here and all these people are just standing there waiting, and I'm like, “You know what? Don't do this to me, okay, because I'm not like that.” I just don't like it.

00:17:58

So but yeah, once I remember he had to do something for the rodeo, and I think he had a heavy night the night before, so he's like, “Mama.” And I said—like, you know, Let's do this. Why don't you do this?” He wanted to do something with okra, so I said, “Why don't you do this?” You know, “Do this. Do this.” And he says, “Oh,” he said, “you've ended up doing everything.” And I said, “Yeah, that's fine. It's okay. Just go there and, you know, put it together and give it—.” But he called and he said, “You know what? They loved it. It was an absolute success.” And I said, you know, “It's all right. That's what we're here for right? Moms?” He calls me Mama, right, **[Laughs]** and I could see that he couldn't think straight, so—.

00:18:37

But you know that—I mean things like that, occasions like that—.

00:18:42

AE: And then what have you, maybe, learned from him?

00:18:45

SP: What have I learned from him? Last time, when I went to his restaurant, different ways of presentation, different ways of putting—I mean like putting garbanzo beans and beef together. I mean, I know we don't serve beef here, but you know, it just gives you ideas. It just gives you different ideas. Like he had the idea of putting that with the *vindaloo* sauce and not just the regular garbanzo beans and the sauce. So the ideas, you know, we—we learn ideas. We have ideas from each other.

00:19:20

AE: Oh, great.

00:19:20

SP: Yeah. That's what it's all about, yeah?

00:19:22

AE: Yeah. And so do you have, you know, through his Off the Wall dinners, I think it's great that he brings—he introduces a lot of people to food that they may not otherwise go out and find on their own. And do you have a sense of—of a—of people who have eaten at Underbelly first and then come to eat with you?

00:19:40

SP: I don't really get to see them or meet them, but Ajay does. And Ajay will say, because he's, you know, either met them, he's seen them, or they'll come here, and they'll tell him, you know. Vice-versa, as well. Ajay has been to Underbelly and people that have eaten at London Sizzler will be there and, you know, he'll come back and say it's like such a small world. It really, really is. But yeah, they do. They do.

00:20:06

AE: Oh, great. I love that sharing and generosity. It's really unusual in many aspects of life, but in the restaurant industry, in particular, I think that's changing in a lot of ways. But I love what he's doing with that and the relationships that he's built, which is why I'm here talking to you today.

00:20:22

But I want to go back again now, if we could, to London and Ajay's Sweet Shop, and you raised a family with that business, yes?

00:20:31

SP: Yes, I did. I actually had my youngest daughter four weeks before we opened. We were about to—we got it ready, and we were about to open it but because I hadn't had her yet, and I remember—we did it with my mom and dad. So my dad said that, you know, we'll just wait until the baby is born, and she's five weeks old, and then after that, we'll open up. And so we opened up after that, yeah.

00:20:54

AE: And so how—I imagine it must have been difficult to leave that and then come to the States. Can you talk about that?

00:21:02

SP: I think that's probably what took the longest, the decision to actually make the move. Every time Ajay came—you know, he moved here when he was eighteen—seventeen, eighteen—but every time he'd come home, he'd like, you know, "Just come. Just come." And I think it was that—that, the business and the family because, you know, obviously, our two girls are still there, my parents were there, my husband's parents were there, his brothers were there—my brother, everybody. And in Houston we actually have not one single person. Nobody. We didn't know anybody. And I think in—that holds you back because, you know, you don't have no friends, family, nobody. Who do you turn to? Who do you go to? More to the point, you're going into a completely new country. It's different if we were just relocating in England somewhere. We still know the rules and regulations. But to come to America, where we don't know nothing, And you know, it was just—it was just very hard. It was very, very hard. But it's good.

00:22:00

AE: So what was, it in the end, that made you take the leap?

00:22:03

SP: Ajay had—he was in Dallas, and he actually had a burglary. His apartment got robbed while he was—he was down to see one of his uncles. We have family in Dallas and I think—I think that just like scared me. I said, you know what? We need to be over there. We just—we need to

be over there. So I think that's what it was. It was just—literally, it was an overnight decision. I said, okay, that's it, we're going.

00:22:35

AE: Well then he said when he had the idea to do a restaurant that it wasn't originally—his original idea was not to do an Indian restaurant.

00:22:43

SP: He wanted to do the sweet shop. That's what the original plan was, to do a sweet shop. But my husband said that if you do a sweet shop, your mind would have to work even harder. If we do a restaurant, she won't have to work. [*Laughs*] So—so that's what he said. In a way, it is true. I don't have to work. Initially, I had to, yes, but now I don't. You know, like I said, I'm going for four weeks [for Ajay's wedding], and they're going to run the place on their own.

00:23:11

AE: So tell me about that aspect of this business of training people and hiring and who—who works with you here?

00:23:17

SP: All the people that we—we hired, we have actually trained from scratch. We don't—we didn't—we—we—in the beginning, we did actually hire chefs, but the one thing that we've come to realize is that they're already set in their ways. They have their own patterns, they have their own individual style of cooking and everything. They will not adapt to what you want them to do. And we are very particular. We want them to do it like this, you know. But they would not

adapt. They just would not bend. So then my husband said, “You know what? It’s best to just take somebody that has nothing to do with cooking and teach them from scratch, literally teach them from the dishwasher and move them up, up.” And that’s what worked. It did work.

00:24:07

AE: So have you hired people who are already familiar with Indian cuisine or people who have never interacted with it at all or a combination?

00:24:15

SP: Never. No, we—none of them have been trained with food. And I think that’s why they all get on so well, as well, and they all work with each other because they moved up the ladder together, so they’re all able and—I think it’s because they were—you know, it’s like probably saying that, you know, if they went from here to another place, it would be hard for them to adjust because they’re being taught a certain way, or they’ve learned a certain way. They’re set in their patterns, set in their ways, and then for them to just change and adapt to somebody else, they won’t do it.

00:24:44

You know, how you hear them, they’ll say, “Oh, yeah, but we used to do it like this?” It’s classic, you know.

00:24:52

AE: So have—how long have the people who you have in the kitchen now, how long have they been with you?

00:24:56

SP: They've all been with us nine, ten years, all of them, so—. [*Laughs*] They'll go for like vacations or stuff like that, like last year one of our—one of our cooks, she went to India for three and a half months and she came back—and she came back to us. So you know, they'll go and do their vacations and they'll—and then come back.

00:25:23

AE: So do you have any non-Indian employees?

00:25:27

SP: We only actually have two Indian employees. All—all the rest of them are Hispanic, all of them.

00:25:36

AE: Have they introduced anything or kind of have a give and take in the kitchen with kind of Latin American food and Indian food?

00:25:45

SP: Yes, my chef [Raymundo Xec, who is from Guatemala], he's actually—he does something with a shrimp dish that he's put a—a Hispanic, you know, Mexican twist to it, and it is actually really nice. [*Laughs*] It's good.

00:26:02

AE: It's on the menu?

00:26:04

SP: He—with—we're working on it at the moment, so he can put it onto this next menu, yeah. So but they—they you know, they just keep trying different things and different ideas, and I think that's why they all work well as a team, and that is the key.

00:26:21

AE: So when you and your husband made that overnight decision to come and be with your son, and you came to Houston. Tell me about what your thoughts of Houston were before you got here.

00:26:33

SP: No, we actually came to Dallas because he was in Dallas. So we were in Dallas, and we actually wanted to do business in Dallas because I have cousin—brothers in Dallas. And so I would have preferred to stay in Dallas. And we visited Houston; we did visit Houston, but I just didn't like it because of the weather. I was like, we were here just like, literally, for one day, and I said, "You know what? I don't like it here." And I remember my husband said to me, he said, "You know what, Sue? Where you don't like it is where you're going to end up." And I'm like, "No way. I'm not going to Houston. I'm not going to Houston." "Okay," he said. "Okay, whatever."

00:27:05

Went back to Dallas, and we were about to close on a deal in Dallas for a restaurant, and my mother-in-law passed away. We were about to close on the Monday, and my mother-in-law passed away on the Friday, so we had to literally rush back to London. So Ajay called the

landlord and told him, “Hey, look, we have to put everything on hold for eleven days because we have eleven—thirteen days mourning so—and we’re going back to London, so as soon as we get back, then we’ll close the deal and finish it.” He said, “Okay.”

00:27:34

So I think on Monday or Tuesday, we were sitting at the airport. Monday, we were sitting at the airport, and the landlord called. And he said to Ajay, he said, you know, “Where are you?” And Ajay said, “We’re just about to catch a flight. What happened?” And he said, “Well, the guy that you were buying from has done a runner. He’s taken everything, and he’s run off.” So Ajay is like, “Okay, you know what? I can’t do anything right now. I’m sitting at an airport. So when I get back, I’ll call you, and then we’ll see what we can do.”

00:28:01

And when we got back, he couldn’t get a hold of the landlord. In the meantime, somebody else called and said that there’s a place—location in Houston. Would you be interested to come and have a look? So at that point, my husband said, “Okay, we’ll—we’re going to have a look.” And here we are. **[Laughs]**

00:28:21

AE: **[Laughs]**

00:28:21

SP: And ever since then, I’ve had to hear, “Told you. Where you don’t want to be is where you’re going to end up.” But now I love Houston. I love it.

00:28:30

AE: Tell me why.

00:28:30

SP: The people here are really friendly. They're very welcoming. They're not scared to try new things. And I just—I just love it. Everything about Houston, I love.

00:28:46

AE: Are you part of the greater Indian community here, socially? I mean, I know you are, geographically speaking where the restaurant is but—?

00:28:53

SP: Not really, no. No, we're—we're not. The Indians are actually divided, like Indians from London, they like tend to stick together. Indians from India, their mentality is just totally different. Indians from like New Zealand or Africa, we—we all tend to have the same sort of outlook on life. Indians from India don't. Even if we go to India, which is supposed to be our mother country, you know, mother tongue and everything, we get called NRIs, non-resident Indians. That's what we are; we're classed as that. So they see us as we're not Indians. We're different because we live a—. And it's really, really hard, so—.

00:29:41

AE: Is there a community of British Indians here?

00:29:43

SP: Yes, there is. Yeah, there is—there is. It's very large, as well, actually. And it's—there's also lots of—there's just lots of British here as well, so we get to meet a lot of people. I think that's one good thing about owning a restaurant: you get to meet a lot of—a lot of different—different sorts of people. And you know, we're at a point where they'll just come in because they want to say hello to you, and it's nice. It's really good. It's a nice, good—it's a good feeling. It's a good feeling.

00:30:12

AE: So you have a lot of regulars then?

00:30:14

SP: Oh, we do. Yeah, we do. We do, you know, yeah.

00:30:20

AE: So tell me about the sweets because you have such a background with the sweet shops and the snacks, and tell me a little bit about more of that side of this business.

00:30:27

SP: Sweets was—is something that, you know, my—it actually goes back three generations because not only did my father-in-law do it, but his father did it, as well, and his father. They did it—they actually started off in Africa. So Ajay always jokes with me, and he said that I've just finished a triangle because—that I took it to London and from London I brought it to America and back to Africa, so he said I've just completed a triangle by bringing it here. So I said, okay. **[Laughs]** The two granddads' wish. So yeah, we just—and we learned as we were going along.

We were in London. When I got married, I was in London for two years. Then we moved to the States, and we were in the States for two years, and then we moved back home again because we didn't like it.

00:31:17

And at that time, that's when we learned everything. And like I said, I think it's just—because we just suddenly, you know, I—I just acquired a certain passion to add new things and make new things, add different twists.

00:31:37

AE: So can you talk about the—kind of the difference in cooking an Indian sweet and cooking the Indian meals? There's—these—the sweets are so precise and beautiful objects, like what goes into all of that?

00:31:51

SP: The main—main ingredient is milk. For the Indian sweets, it's mainly milk, but there's different ways of using, you know, milk. You can use the milk powder, you can use just regular milk, cream, you know, you can curd the milk and the make sweets from that. Or you can just boil sugar and add the powder to it and there's just—there's different styles, but mainly it is milk.

00:32:18

AE: So in the different shapes and styles of each of the sweets, is there any significance to those things or just to differentiate them as—as different items?

00:32:29

SP: It's just for different items really and just—Indian sweets is all about color. Milk, richness, and color. It, literally, is about color.

00:32:42

AE: Do you have a favorite?

00:32:43

SP: My favorite is probably *kaju ghutri*, the—the cashew nuts one—that one is my favorite. I like that. It's not too rich, and it's not too sweet. And it's—it literally is just made up with cashew powder, that's it. But it's nice.

00:33:02

AE: And so Ajay was telling me that you do a lot of special orders with the sweets and really kind of high-volume on that side of the business.

00:33:08

SP: Hmm. We do for this—for the sweets, we do—we do. I don't know. It's like when I was talking to you the other day about Diwali, like, you know, like, how you have Christmas or Thanksgiving, and Diwali—you know, people, what they, do is, the end of the year, so they go to each of those houses, and they give sweets. So we'll—we'll get orders for, you know, 150 boxes of sweets. That will be just one person because they're going to go and pass them around to everybody. That's—it's the equivalent of chocolates, our sweets are.

00:33:46

AE: Were those things that—my microphone is giving me trouble here—were those things that people still make at home at all or not so much?

00:33:53

SP: Not so much. That's probably why they buy them from shops, anyway, because it is—it's like, how you said it's very—it is intricate, it is very precise. I mean like the boiling point of sugar is very precise. You know, you just turn away for a split second, and the sugar will be boiled too much. You have to throw it away. So, and it's messy, as well. It's like me. I never cook at home—never. I've been here for ten years and probably the only thing I ever make at home is toast because I have to clean up. So that's why I don't cook at home. [*Laughs*] I always cook here.

00:34:30

AE: Do you eat here every day?

00:34:32

SP: Yes, we do, before I go home. We'll normally eat here before I go home. I make it here. And—or sometimes we'll just take it home and eat at home. But normally we eat here.

00:34:43

AE: What do you like to eat outside of the restaurant here in Houston?

00:34:46

SP: I'm not really an outside person. As in like what other restaurants or—?

00:34:54

AE: Or kinds of food?

00:34:57

SP: My favorite is steak. That's it. Even when we went to Chris' place he's like, "Mama, don't order." He said, "I'm going to bring it out." Because he's looking at me because he knows. He said, "Look, he said, I know but," he said—because I—I don't like fish. And he's like—I said you know, "There's certain things I don't like. You know that." And he's like, "No, no, no, trust me. You'll like it. You'll like it." He wouldn't tell me what it was. He made me taste it, and I'm like—but he knows, as well, I just like steak. I'm a steak lover. I love steak.

00:35:27

AE: And what's your favorite thing to make in the kitchen, if you took yourself out of the restaurant and just something that you really enjoy cooking?

00:35:36

SP: I think I—I like making our *Gujarati*, the full meal. I love doing that. You know, like when you've got guests or something like that. But it's, like I said, it's messy because there's usually like two or three veg [vegetable] curries, and you've got your, *dal* [lentils], you've got your rice, you've got your *raita* [condiment made with yogurt] and you have a sweet, and then you have to have a—a *bhajiya* [deep-fried savory snack] or something like that as well, so this—it's like seven—eight items you have to make, but it's messy.

00:36:07

So I make it here. But I like—I do like doing that. I like cooking a full—full Gujarati meal.

00:36:14

AE: Well and you're about to leave for many weeks on family business, new grandbaby.

00:36:22

SP: Yes, I am, four weeks. I can't wait. I'm so excited.

00:36:25

AE: And you're going to be out of the kitchen.

00:36:28

SP: Yeah. [*Laughs*] I'm going to be out of this kitchen and probably over there in somebody's kitchen or somebody—you know, I've got two daughters there, so they're all looking forward. "Mom, you have to make this for us," and "Mom, you have to do this and—." I've got my nephews and my brother, so they're all looking forward. You know, "You got to make the chicken *biryani* [chicken and rice dish] or you got to make this. But it's not—it's not the same as being in a commercial kitchen all day, so—but, yeah.

00:36:55

AE: Exciting. Well what do you think the future holds for the Patel family here in Houston and the London Sizzler?

00:37:06

SP: Ah, what does it hold? Well for me, personally, I intend to enjoy my grandbabies, cut back on the hours that I'm working, you know. Ajay said, "Why don't you just retire?" And I said, "I can't retire. I'll never retire because I'll drive you guys all mad if I retire." But I will cut back on the hours. And I just want to enjoy the grandbabies. And hopefully, I want to expand London Sizzler. We do want to take it to other cities, so there's a couple of things in the pipeline right now. So, we'll see. Let's see what happens, what fate has in store for us. That's it, right?

00:37:45

AE: That's awfully exciting. Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add or—or share?

00:37:53

SP: I think I've just more or less said everything, really. My main thing was I wanted to say—was a lot of people have said that, you know, what makes London Sizzler so different, but I think it's just because the experiences that I am—enjoyed and the cooking styles I enjoyed as I was—as I was growing up and with the families, two sets—the families. And I think I incorporated that into the dishes, and I think that's what makes the difference.

00:38:28

AE: I can absolutely see that. Well good luck to you and all the good fortune coming your way with the family events and your travels. And thank you so much for sitting with me today. I appreciate it.

00:38:38

SP: Thank you so much for having me.

00:38:40

[End Sue Patel—London Sizzler Interview]