

ZOË'S KITCHEN

1927 29th Ave. South
Birmingham, AL 35209
(205) 870-1100
www.zoeskitchen.com

"I got a lot from my grandmother that lived here, who was born in Greece. She did all the kind of stuff... gardening and saving seeds and cutting up old coats and making, you know, clothes for her children." --**Zoë Cassimus**

Zoë Proferis Cassimus has been surrounded by the food business all her life. Her father had the legendary John's restaurant in downtown Birmingham, her cousins still have Kontos Produce (a family business for almost a century), and her husband's family used to own a grocery store on 6th Avenue North. Obviously then, it is really no surprise that Zoë would make a name for herself and her style of food. Her mothers cooking style and philosophy on nutrition was the primary inspiration for her popular café, incorporating traditional Greek ingredients like olive oil and feta cheese. After years of cooking for friends and some prodding by her family, she opened Zoë's Kitchen in 1995. In the short time since, Zoë's has become synonymous with outstanding and simple food that just happens to be healthy. Her success has been multiplied by the involvement of her son, John, who is overseeing Zoë's Kitchen as a franchised restaurant concept. Even with stores as far away as Phoenix, the original Zoë's is as comfortable and as personal as if you were eating in her kitchen at home.

Full Interview Transcription:

Zoë Cassimus, Owner
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INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
DATE: March 11, 2004 @ 4:00 p.m.
LOCATION: Zoë's Kitchen
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: the Alabama public radio station can be heard continuously, the restaurant's clean-up crew can be heard for most of the interview, and the ice machine can be heard dropping new ice regularly. When the occurring

sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

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[Voice on radio heard in background]

Amy Evans: This is Thursday, March eleventh, and this is Amy Evans with Zoë Cassimus at Zoë's restaurant on 29th Avenue in Birmingham. [Sound of ice machine] And Zoë, if you wouldn't mind stating your n—[sound of microphone being moved in front of Mrs. Cassimus] name and, only if you want to, your birthdate, for the record. [Laughs]

Zoë Cassimus: Yeah, I won't do that. [Speaking directly into the microphone] Zoë Proferis Cassimus. July the twenty-ninth, nineteen whatever.

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: [Laughs]

AE: Okay. And the microphone will pick up your voice from where you are, so you don't have to worry about—

ZC: Okay.

AE: --speaking into it. Um, and if we could start—just briefly, if you could tell us the history of, um, your father's [John Proferis] involvement in the restaurant business. When he came to the states or if he was born here.

ZC: No, he was born in Greece.

AE: Okay.

ZC: And, uh—he came—he was born in nineteen—he was born in 1899. And he came when he was a teen—young teenager—and worked in New York and then found his way down to Birmingham in—in his early twenties and just worked in different restaurants and [short pause] At one time he was in Pennsylvania because his sister was there for a time, but then he ended up in Birmingham permanently.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: And, uh, worked in different restaurants. And then had his first restaurant called The Casino, which was, uh, on 20th Street in downtown Birmingham and had that up until the war [World War I] started. And then, during the war, he had the concession at the dynamite plant in Childersburg [city southeast of Birmingham]. And after the war, he came back to—well he

li—we always lived here. And in the—about 1944, opened John's [Restaurant] in downtown Birmingham—21st Street. And it was just an overnight success because he had the reputation from the other restaurant but—He was the first person to have fresh fish in the city. And it was not—it had—had—it was not a Greek restaurant. It was never—there was never anything in there that, um, with the name "Greek" in it, other than a Greek salad and then when he started doing Greek-style fish. He was the first person to do that, which was just olive oil, lemon and oregano. But that was it. He never did Greek lamb or anything. No Greek food, so—he's never—he would never—never had a Greek restaurant. [Sound of ice machine and ice dropping.]

AE: Um, let me ask you, where in Greece did he come from?

ZC: He came from, um, um—well—it's called Leunithian, but it's in Sparta.

AE: Okay. And did he come by himself—

ZC: Came by himself.

AE: --when he came to the states?

ZC: With a nametag on.

AE: Yeah. Do you know how he made it to Birmingham? Was somebody else here?

ZC: No, I don't.

AE: Okay.

ZC: Just word of mouth got out that the South was the place to be. [Short pause] It--my mother never—we never really wrote a lot of it down.

AE: Yeah. How did he meet your mother, do you know?

ZC: Just at church.

AE: Okay.

ZC: My mother was born—my mother's from Greek parents—but was born in Birmingham.

AE: Okay. And what is her name?

ZC: Cleo. And her maiden name was Kontos. Uh, they were in the, uh, produce business--

AE: Okay. Yes, I'm familiar with—

ZC: --and in bananas.

AE: --Kotos Produce. It's still—

ZC: Um-hmm.

AE: --in existence over on—

ZC: Yeah, they still own it.

AE: --Finley Avenue. And then, that reminds me, I asked your husband, Marcus—before you arrived here—your last name, Cassimus, all the research that I've been doing, Cassimus is the name of the first—alleged first Greek immigrant to Birmingham. Do you know that there's—

ZC: Right, we knew that, but we're not related.

AE: Okay. Okay.

ZC: Did he tell you that?

AE: No, he said that he didn't really—

ZC: No, we're not.

AE: --okay.

ZC: We're not. And the name Cassimus—there are a lot of Greek—r—a lot of names are regional. And the--most of the Cassimuses that we know all came from the other part of Greece, which is Corfu.

AE: Okay.

ZC: On--on the other side.

AE: Okay.

ZC: The island, Corfu.

AE: Well, then, um—

ZC: But my—um, go ahead.

AE: I was just going to ask, I put a call in to John Kontos at Kontos Produce yesterday. How is--is he—

ZC: He's my first cousin.

AE: Okay.

ZC: His daddy and my mother were brother and sister.

AE: Okay. Got it. And so, John's restaurant. What kind of restaurant was that when it first opened? Was it a fine dining--

ZC: Just fine dining.

AE: Okay.

ZC: White tablecloths at night and -but-but open for lunch. And with, you know, just Formica tables, waitresses, you know, wine and liquor and-but-just packed from morning until night. For like lunch we-they gave out numbers. I mean, people were just lined up from the first day they opened.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: And they'd have a little lull in the afternoon. Say, between two and five. And then it started again from five to ten. [Scraping sound coming from the kitchen] And they were never open on Sundays.

AE: And can you speak a little bit to what downtown Birmingham was like during that time?

ZC: It was just--in the fifties, when I was a little girl, it was incredible. My--uh, Dad worked at night, so my mother and I--I'm an only child--my mother and I would like ride the bus downtown so that, you know, we wouldn't have another car and ride home with him. And we'd just walk around downtown, go to the movie at the Alabama Theater and then walk up to John's and eat dinner w--with him and--Especially on weekends--on Friday and Saturday.

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: And just--got--it was just like--everybody kind of just knew everybody and, um--well, we all kind of lived in the same area. We moved from Norwood to Homewood [suburbs of Birmingham]. And, I mean, I still have people that come in here that ate in John's as kids, remembering my father coming around cutting their steak and tasting it, making sure it was right and--just a--he--he just--he ran the--he didn't work in the kitchen. He ran--he was out front. But the food was unbelievable. He just had all original recipes. Kind of like I s--did with my concept. He had like homemade shrimp gumbo that nobody's ever been able to even come close to. He had this French--homemade, uh, French dressing that he did on the John's slaw

that—it was an original recipe that, uh, I still have. We sold the rights to John's slaw when the first people bought John's.

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: The first people we sold it to in seventy-two? And then his—those people are dead, but their son's have taken over the recipe and are mass-producing it in grocery stores, but it's not a—it's not even the—similar to what the original dressing was.

AE: Really? Well, I've noticed that there are a lot of restaurants in town who serve what they call John's slaw.

ZC: Right.

AE: That originated, though—

ZC: But nobody knows how to do it but me.

AE: --I guess—Right. [Laughs]

ZC: But I don't do it here. I do—

AE: Well, the family that, um, took over John's, are they Greek as well?

ZC: Uh-huh.

AE: Okay.

[EDITED FOR CONTENT: About 1 minute of the interview]

AE: Yeah. Did the restaurant change hands when your father passed? Or before that?

ZC: No, we sold it before he died. Because my husband didn't want to do it.

[EDITED FOR CONTENT: About 1 minute of the interview]

ZC: It's—it's still around. I don't even know who—I haven't—I don't even know who owns it. It's changed hands a couple of times.

AE: Yeah, that's what I hear.

ZC: And they still have a rel—you know, most people in Birmingham know, you know, that we haven't had anything to do with it since 1972 but—they still have the original—you know, they try to do that slaw, they still do this—this Trout Almondine dish that my dad invented, and they still do

cornbread and the sweetrolls. I understand they do, but I-- like I say, I haven't been there.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, in that interim from the mid-seventies to when you opened Zoë's in ninety-five, was your family in a restaurant at all or—

ZC: Oh, uh-uh. No, I never worked and we never did any—I mean, my husband's in the insurance business, and I just cooked for everybody and everybody's party, you know, just for fun. And I always had big parties at my house. I did a lot of cooking down at my church. And grad—and—just in growing up around—around the—around food and around, uh, [short pause] the food business, you just kind have a—you know, a gift. It's really a gift. You just can't make yourself—make yourself do it.

AE: Hmm.

ZC: Uh, one other thing I was going to say, that I—like, you mentioned Jimmy Koikos [owner of The Bright Star in Bessemer, Alabama]? Well, Jimmy Koikos and—had gotten—always came to Daddy for advice. And, of course, Connie Kanakis, who used to have Connie Kanakis's, who's moved. He was big buddies with Daddy. And the Eli Stevens, who owns Lloyd's [restaurant], and then the Stevens that own the bakery—he—the—their—their parents—Eli's parents were my parents best friends and—so it's kind of like a close kind of a thing. And, uh—

AE: Yeah.

ZC: --my father was distantly related to George Sarris [who owns the Fish Market Restaurant].

AE: Really? Okay.

ZC: Distantly, I don't know. Or maybe just from the same part of Greece.

AE: Well, it really is a tight community here.

ZC: Um-hmm.

AE: And that's something that's—seems really neat.

ZC: But we don't go to the Greek Church.

AE: You don't? Okay.

ZC: So I don't really see a lot of Greek people.

AE: Did you grow up in the Greek Church?

ZC: Yeah. [Short pause] I did.

AE: Go to Greek school and all that?

ZC: Yeah, but I've been--I've been an Episcopalian in like—for twenty-five years.

AE: Oh, okay. Have you been in—to visit Greece at all?

ZC: Yes. I went once as a child with my parents, and then once about ten years ago with my husband.

AE: And what is your—just a brief kind of lineage of your father's—or your husband's family, pardon me.

ZC: My what?

AE: Your husband's family?

ZC: Uh, well, I think when his father first came from Greece, he also was in the restaurant business. And then—at La Patee, I think. And then, they—he ended up owning a small grocery store, like a mom and pop kind of thing, down, uh, on 6th Avenue North. My husband's—they still own the property, but they sold the business.

AE: Okay.

ZC: My husband's father died young.

[Short pause]

AE: Okay.

ZC: But—

AE: And then—

ZC: I'll tell you how I got interested in food. Well, because my parent—my mother was, uh [short pause] real well educated and into nutrition. And so she really was—she did—my dad cooked some at home, but she was really interested in the nutritional side of food. And my father was fat, and my mother was tall and skinny, so she knew all this stuff about fat cells. So, I never had any—I never had any fried food, I never had any sweets. Never any candy, any—any soft drinks.

AE: That's hard in the South! [Laughs]

ZC: Nothing cooked with anything but like steamed with olive oil. So I was like doing all the stuff that people are doing now. I mean, I was just raised like that. [Sound of ice machine]

AE: Well, I know tha—that was something that was so striking when I visited the Zoë's Kitchen website, is that you h—you've hired a nutritionist who's on staff, and you're—

ZC: Right.

AE: --really conscious about your ingredients.

ZC: Well, what happened, when I—when I first—my husband talked me into doing it because—I—the children—I mean, we got married young, and the children were gone, and I was—I mean, I'm not really, um, you know, a club kind of person, so [short pause] He just said, "I think you need to do this and just do it small and just be like a hobby." Well, we never thought—really thought it would do what it—what it did. But I—when I'd said it, I knew that I would never have anything fattening or fried or hamburgers, but I also knew that if I used the word "low-fat" or "healthy," that I'd scare a lot of people off. Because—especially men. They would think that, uh, you were—had a tearoom. So that—so I—I designed the menu with that in m—mind. Because that's the way we--you know, we eat at home. And, um, eventually, people just discovered for themselves that it was low-fat and healthy and—and then my husb—my son [John Cassimus] is the one that picked up on the nutrition end of it and doing the food—you know, the food triangle and—

AE: Um-hmm. Well, and I--

ZC: Do you know about the—like the ladies that—the ladies—

AE: Yes, I read that on the website! The ladies who lost all the weight—

ZC: Um-hmm.

AE: --the sisters.

ZC: And that was amazing.

AE: Yeah. That's phenomenal.

ZC: Because they—they—

ZC: They weren't into nutrition or dieting, and it just, you know, just happened.

AE: And what is that? They went to the store downtown--

ZC: Yeah, I mean—

AE: --everyday for lunch?

ZC: Every day for like a year—over a year.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: And lost —together—like 375 pounds. But the funny thing is, we're so busy, you know, at lunch, that we really don't get to talk to our customers. So John [Zoë's son]—he was at that store downtown a lot, when it first opened. And he—you know, you notice people, but you—you just—you know, you feel bad you can't get to talk to them. Well, one day she was in there late, and he just was trying to be nice and walked up and said, "How's your lunch?" And she said, "Fine." And he said, "Haven't you lost a lot of weight?" And she said, "Yes!" She said, "I've lost like 150 pounds." And he said, "What did you do?" And he—and she said, "I eat Zoë's. I've eaten lunch here every day for a year-and-a-half."

AE: My.

ZC: And she, you know, volunteered the information about her sister [sound of ice machine], and that's how the story—

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: --came about.

AE: That's amazing. To be responsible for—well, partly responsible for

ZC: The only thing—the only word I used on the menu that would—that would come close to saying low-fat was the lean. Just the lean—

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: --turkey pita, which is like ninety-nine percent fat free turkey and—

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: --on the pita bread, with our slaw and—but—everything basically is healthy and is low fat. And now with this—with this carb thing, it's just taken off like crazy because we don't have sugar in anything in the store except our cake. And so many people put sugar in *everything*: salad dressing, of course mayonnaise has some sugar in it, but I mean--and we use regular mayonnaise, we don't use low fat mayonnaise or no s—you know, but—we—we—we put the—that—that [sound of ice machine] article helped and then just the Atkins [Diet] thing just—just—it's just been unbelievable.

AE: The time is right. And I know you're known for your chicken salad. Are there other signature items that you're—

ZC: Well, the chicken salad and then our—our slaw is like the most popular thing.

AE: Is it the same as your father's?

ZC: No, we don't do that. We do a—a—it's just a vinaigrette with, uh [sort pause] just little green onion and feta and ha—and shredded cabbage.

AE: Um-hmm. So you have some more Greek kind of influenced items—

ZC: Yeah. Well, we—

AE: --on your menu?

ZC: --our Greek salad, and then our Greek salad with grilled chicken, and then—the—the chicken is definitely seasoned with Greek seasoning because it's just lemon, olive oil and oregano and salt and pepper. So that is. But—you know, the average person, if you ask them if they go to Zoë's, they would not say it was a Greek restaurant.

AE: Right.

ZC: Because, you know, we don't have lamb, we don't have any meat. All we have is chicken, and then we have a turkey sandwich and a ham sandwich and then everything—everything is basically from chicken.

AE: Well, are the Greek items inspired by things—because you made them at home, or—

ZC: Yes. I'll tell you--

AE: --are they because you're consciously—

ZC: No, they were—they're all inspired from home. Like—like the, um, Greek quesadilla is basically a simplified version of a spanakopita [Greek spinach pie]. Have you ever had that? With the philo [flaky pastry]?

AE: Yeah.

ZC: Well, I don't want to—I didn't want to deal with raw eggs 'cause, you know, they're testy and dan—you know, dangerous. So basically, I modified the spanakopita to just raw spinach with green onions, feta cheese and cream cheese with no eggs and just—don't even cook the spinach. And we do it in a flour tortilla. So that's called a Greek quesadilla, and you do that with or without chicken. And then our chicken roll-up, which is the

number—first—our most—our most popular item, has the—the grilled chicken breast. Basically, everything in here is made with that grilled chicken breast. It's just boneless and skinless chicken that's lightly marinated that we grill, and then we do them whole in a pita or whole on a bun, or cut up in slices and do it in the roll-up, which is the number one seller. The roll-up and the slaw are the two most popular things.

AE: Well and I remember from your website, um, in the "philosophy" area on your website—

ZC: John did—John did all that.

AE: Yeah. There's a photograph of your father grilling some chicken on a galvanized bucket.

ZC: Isn't that funny?

AE: That's a great photograph.

ZC: He used—

AE: It's really great.

ZC: I think it's—I think it's lamb. But anyway, he, uh—John chose this incredible design firm in Columbus, Ohio, that came up with all that.

AE: It's gorgeous.

ZC: And we're real—I'm real happy with it. When I heard they were getting rid of my chicken? It was like—

AE: Your chicken logo?

ZC: Yeah.

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: I was like, "Are you crazy?"

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: You know, it's like somebody saying you're going to shave your baby's curls!"

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: But then, I mean I'm not—I'm—I've always—I'm always open for discussion and don't think—I mean, I'm not a—know-it-all. You know,

especially when he said, "We've got to have a look that when you go into the place—when you're next to Starbucks, and you're next to Panera [Bakery], people that drive by have got to say, 'I want to go in there,'" you know. We didn't want to do anything flashy, but he knew that, when you're in that competition, and you're in that kind of rent—of that area, where you've got that kind of competition? You've got to have something that's going to get them in there, and we feel that once people taste our food, it doesn't matter what the place looks like, they're coming back. But once you—you've got to have—you've got to have—and people do like to be in a—in an attractive place.

AE: Sure.

ZC: They don't mind it here [at the original Zoë's, which is a tiny little neighborhood café], you know, because they're used to it.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: I mean, I've had people tell me—I—that they love the ambiance in here, and I say like, "What ambiance?"

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: [Laughs]

AE: Well, was, uh, the franchising basically your son's idea? Did that all come—

ZC: Yeah. I mean, I—yeah. I had—he asked me--when we knew what a success it was, if I wanted to open up another store, and I said, "No. I'm just not interested." I—I mean, I'm in my sixties, and I just don't want to work—like when I first started, I said, "I'm not working at night, I'm not working on weekends, and if I don't make any money, I don't care. I'll quit."

AE: Yeah.

ZC: So I—I mean, I wanted him to stick with the concept of *never* opening on—not—just—when you can make—wh—I mean, he never would have gone into it if he thought he was going to work at night and weekends.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: And the one that—and his first store was not open at night and on weekends. [Sound of ice machine] But then, when he started thinking about developing a—when it got so popular—developing it and franchising it, and he opened up a store at the Summit [a high-end mall in Birmingham], and it is open, you know, night and on weekends, and it's just—just—their business is just unbelievable. I mean, people, uh, you know. At night it's near the

theater and—he's really done—I mean, like he went and bought a location at the Summit. He saw this—a guy had this, um, little chocolate place that was doing nothing. Like fancy chocolates like right near the theater. And Johnny Ro—Rockets was on the other end. And he went in there—and this is so funny. An older man owned it as an investment and had this girl working in there that I knew. The old man that owned it ended up being a friend of my father's.

AE: Really?

ZC: Yes. And so John just said he—you—do you like this location? Are you doing well? And the man said, "No." And John said, "Well, will you sell it to me?" So he basically just talked him into it and got the location and—

AE: Huh. My goodness.

ZC: Now, all the stores are not franchises. He [John] owns some of them.

AE: Okay. Well, how old is your son, if I may ask?

ZC: Thirty-seven.

AE: Okay, so is he—a youngster--was he able to, um, your father's restaurant when he was little?

ZC: No, he was—he was like five.

AE: Okay.

ZC: [Zoë says goodbye to the employees who were cleaning up the restaurant after it closed and during our interview] Bye, y'all! Oh, Fernando? I have a bunch of stuff for you, but I'll just give it to you tomorrow—

[RECORDING STOPPED]

[RECORDING RESUMES]

ZC: Um, he, um—oh, now he remembers John's but, you know, as a five-year-old, but he just got all his food—I mean, he's always liked to cook.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: Always. And, um, I remember one time, we were at a party and he called and he said, "I want to make a cake." And I said, "Well, go get a cake mix and read the directions and—" He said, "No, I don't want to make a cake like that. I want to make a *real* cake."

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: [Laughs]

AE: From scratch.

ZC: So, he's always—he cooked—he played football at [The University of] Alabama and after that he went into the insurance business. And my husband was in the insurance business, and neither one of them ever really liked it. I mean, he just decided—um, he started another company that did like s—like hat—like bandanas and t-shirts and sold that business. And then, when he asked me if I wanted to expand, and I said no, then he just—I—I said, "Go for it." But he never—we never thought it would end up like this. We're all—we're already in Arizona.

AE: Yeah, that's amazing.

ZC: But d—all the food—like I say, I'm not known as a Greek restaurant, but we do mod—everything like the Greek—the soup—our chicken soup and orzo soup? You know, the original recipe has like raw eggs in it and it's foamy. Have you ever had it?

AE: [Shakes head]

ZC: It's called Avgolemono? Well, I wasn't—like I say, I wasn't going to fool with anything hazardous, so I didn't—I make--I make the chicken soup without eggs. It's just--but it is basically kind of a modification of Greek e—Greek egg lemon soup. But it's just, you know, whole chickens with [short pause] vegetables and orzo.

AE: What do you think your father would say about your success at Zoë?

ZC: I think he would absolutely like, just be blown away. And we—I also moved into the house that my parents bought in the forties. And we've redone it, you know, with real pretty gardens and a new kitchen and—I mean, he'd just be—I don't know. He--I—it just—and then my mother, you know, was so interested in food. It—it's just—like—when we used to do like ladies luncheons, and we'd do like chicken salad, and I always wanted to do these big beautiful lettuce leaves, and she'd say, "Why don't you do shredded lettuce? No one eats lettuce leaves." And, I mean, she died without me ever having shredded lettuce under a chicken salad plate because I wanted the big fancy lettuce leaves. Well, when I did this restaurant, I did shredded lettuce.

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: And people eat every bite of it. And there was another girl that had a business—not Greek—but had a kind of a delicatessen, and she had a fabulous chicken salad plate. Bye, thank you! [Zoë says goodbye to her

couple of her employees again]. And she did huge [sound of the front door creaking open], uh, leaf lettuce leaves. I mean, gorgeous washed lettuce leaves. And I—and we used to eat in there every—like all the time before I went into business. And I started looking and I said, “You know, Mother might have been right. Nobody eats that lettuce.” But sometimes we did—my husband and I did because we just like lettuce. But now we have the shredded lettuce on the—on the chicken salad plate—and just a lot of things. I mean you just—t—to, um—not to have any formal education in—in food and not, you know, culinary experience like Frank [Frank Stitt. Chef and owner of Highlands Bar and Grill]. Um, well most—all the people that you said you’ve interviewed had no culinary experience.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: But my—my concept is a little different from theirs I mean, they’re doing high end dinners, and I’m not. But I—I just didn’t—I—I simplified it as much as possible because we—I felt like to make—we—you’re going to—I was doing it to make money, and to make money in a small area—a, um—place like this? You’ve got to do the same thing over and over again.

AE: Yeah, be consistent.

ZC: And do it right and not—not—because I remember Frank [Stitt]. I’ve been friends with Frank since he opened Highlands, and I can remember seeing him sitting outside of the Continental Bakery, saying that [sound of ice machine] the hardest part about his business is creating a new menu. So I—you know, I—I wanted to do it—just get—once I got it simplified and I—and I trained people to do the same thing over and over again—like when we first did it, I was coming in every day and making the salad dressing without measuring anything.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: And my friend Joanne—she was gone when you were here. The lady that has been with me since I opened. One day I came in and—it’s kind of like I wanted to do everything. I wanted to make every sandwich, I wanted—and so one day she said, “Zoë, why don’t you, um, get me a recipe for those dressings and you won’t have to do it.” And I said, “Joanne, I’ve never written down a recipe in my life.” And it was so strange. The first time I ever tried to measure it, it was absolutely perfect. And I’ve never—and I—and never had to change it. Our slaw dressing is th—that’s [Zoë turns around to point at the bottles of Zoë’s Dressing that are sitting on the counter on display] the Greek dressing that goes on the Greek salad. And then the only—I mean, I’m not snooty about any of my recipes, but I don’t sell the slaw dressing. It’s kind of like, if you ask me what’s in it, I’ll tell you.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: But I don't sell it. I don't sell the slaw dressing. And it's—it's lighter. It just--that's like—we don't use pure olive oil. I just felt like to make it lighter, we use eighty- percent vegetable and twenty percent olive oil. And we—I just—that was another thing I wanted to do is not have a real heavy salad dressing. And then the slaw dressing—the slaw that everybody likes so much is just white vinegar and canola oil, so it's really light.

AE: This dressing that you have bottled, do you just have that here or do you have it—

ZC: You can't sell it—the reason we can't sell it anywhere else is because, um, you have to list ingredients, and you just have to go through a different process, and we're just—I'm not in that business. I want to just s—you know, just concentrate on this.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: We sell a lot of dressing in here, but I'm just not—I'm not a—we're--right now we're not selling it in stores—in grocery stores.

AE: Yeah. How did you come up with the chicken logo that you have on your stuff?

ZC: My—I've just always loved chickens, and my first idea, when I first was thinking about going into business—I haven't talked about this very much. I, um, was going to open up this store in—in this little-bitty place like a fourth of this size, and I was going to do nothing but have whole baked chickens and chicken sandwiches and chicken salad and that was it. So I wanted a chicken logo. And I have a friend who's a famous—she's famous around here—artist, and she did it for me. Her name's Peyton Carmichael and I have the original one in—at my house. It's over my stove. It' a big round—so I'm not—I plan on just keeping this store like it is and not changing the—to the new look. We're opening up a new store that's in Crestline?

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: That's going to be the new Zoë's, and it's going to have the new look.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: Have you seen the one downtown?

AE: Um-hmm. I've been by it. I've not been in but yeah. It's a remarkable transformation.

ZC: But, uh—my old gr—I mean, it's kind of like a Martha Stewart kind of a thing. People don't really—[short pause] Not that I compare myself to Martha Stewart, but um—

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: My, um, at—I mean, I got a lot from my grandmother that lived here, who was born in Greece. She did all the kind of stuff like Martha Stewart's grandmother did, like gardening and saving seeds and cutting up old coats and making, you know, clothes for her children. Because she—my mother was one of nine. And then my—I have cookbooks that my mother had bought when she was like, a teenager. Because she—but my grandmother was an excellent cook. And she made cakes and stuff from no recipes.

AE: What was your grandmother's name?

ZC: Stella. Kontos. So it's kind—I went to Martha Stewart's for a seminar once, and so I k—I feel like I know her and I'm, um, I always kind of like—I mean, I'm [short pause] kind of a perfectionist. Not--not kind of, I am a perfectionist. And having seen, you know, how she [short pause] really did all the stuff that she talked about doing?

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: It's just kind of a sad scenario.

AE: Yeah, turn of events.

ZC: We were there—my best friend and I were there for three days up in Westport at her house. And business before—this was in the eighties but, uh—I just feel like you can't—I guess the reason I f—I even mention her in the same sentence with me is because she has got all that stuff from her—from her ethnic background.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: And I feel like I did—I did too. I mean, I have a lot of friends that like to cook and entertain and garden but, uh [short pause] It's just—it's not the same. I mean, they couldn't come do this.

AE: Yeah. Yeah, it's definitely a different—

ZC: I mean, I sound like I'm bragging, but I'm—well, I—I mean, it's kind of exciting to think that my husband said, "I want you to do this." And then I make up a menu like, by myself. [Short pause] And then the—I mean, I just made it all up!

AE: Yeah.

ZC: And the recipes.

AE: Yeah. And you definitely are good at what you did.

[Sound of front door creaking open.]

ZC: What do you need, Miss?

[A young girl walks in the café to see about getting some food]

GIRL: Hey! How are you doing?

ZC: Good.

GIRL: Um—

ZC: We're—[Recording stops while Zoë interacts with the young lady. Zoë tells her that the restaurant is closed, but that she'd be happy to get her some slaw or something that she doesn't have to put together. The girl declines the offer and goes on her way.]

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING RESUMES]

ZC: Like when I decided to do the side salads to go with the sandwiches? They're all just [short pause] kind of original recipes. The chicken, you know, we don't—none of the side things have mayonnaise in them. The slaw doesn't have mayonnaise, the potato salad doesn't have mayonnaise, the pasta doesn't have mayonnaise.

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: And we have fresh fruit. It's kind of like all of all.

AE: Um-hmm. Um, well is John your only child?

ZC: No, I have two girls.

AE: Okay.

ZC: They're married. Both have children. John's not married.

AE: Okay. And your daughters, have they ever been interested in being a part of this or anything?

ZC: No, they have children. They're busy. One of them lives in Jacksonville, Florida, and the one who lives here has three boys: fourteen, eleven and five so—

AE: My goodness.

ZC: But they cook and entertain just like I used to when I was their age.

AE: Uh-huh. Um, well to back up a little bit more just for a second, do you remember, um, growing up and going downtown and spending some time in some other restaurants that were downtown? Maybe—

ZC: The only one that I ever—well, the—I remember the Bright Star because Jimmy Koikos's sister was my best friend, and I used to go to Bessemer all the time so—

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: And her—his parents were my parents' friends, and I've been in there all my life.

AE: Uh-huh.

ZC: And then, I was at the La Patee a lot in the fifties—in the—maybe middle to late fifties.

AE: Okay.

ZC: And—but I don't remem—I don't—I remember the lamb and [short pause] and that's about it. And, uh, of course the Bright Star, we went out—we went out there a lot on Sunday, you know, and ate—and a--family kind of thing. We'd all sit together and—before you could have liquor on Sunday, Mr. Koikos used to fix Daddy a drink in a coffee cup and—

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: [Laughs] Um, but those are really the only two—of course, I—you know, there's never really been a Greek restaurant in Birmingham. Quote, "A Greek Restaurant." There's never been one. That just serves—you know, like Greek restaurants in other—in big cities.

AE: Um-hmm. Hmm. Did you ever go into any of the hot dog places downtown?

ZC: Oh, yeah! I know—

AE: Okay.

ZC: Like, uh, in fact, Pete's Famous--I took one of my—we were going—I took my grandson in there one day, and he had never been there, and he's had Sneaky Pete's and everything. And he tasted the hot dog, and he said, "Mmm, Ya-Ya! What kind of sauce is this?" And I said, "Why?" And he said,

"This is the best thing I've ever tasted. And I told Gus [Koutroulakis, the owner of Pete's Famous] that? And he said, "He's a smart kid!"

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: And I said, "Well, he came out coming from this family!"

AE: [Laughs] Yeah, I visited with Gus the other day. He's quite a character.

ZC: Oh, he's a mess.

AE: [Laughs]

ZC: Yeah, my grandchildren have—definitely have a—ha—they have an educated palette.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: I made, uh [short pause] just had grilled salmon one night at home, and so the next day I had too much, so I made some salmon patties. Just for—for us—my—me and my husband. And I had some dill on it, and it was—you know, and a little like, grainy mustard or whatever the night before. So when I made it—made the salmon patties, they had the most unbelievable flavor because they were—it was fresh salmon. So I took one over to my daughter's house and I said, "Claire, you've got to taste this." So [short pause] he—he was sitting there. I think he was like twelve, and he said, "Can I have a bite of that?" And he tasted it and he said, "What is that?" And I said [Laughs], "That's a salmon patty." And he said, "Where did you get that?" And I said, "I made it!" And he said, "Well, what do you mean you made it?" He was—he—I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "It kind of tastes like something you'd have at the Highlands."

AE: Ohhhh! [Laughs]

ZC: [Laughs] But—

AE: Well, cooking's in your genes then.

ZC: Yep, that's it. But, um, let's see. I mean, I'd love to do—if I were—if I were young and didn't have the Zoë's thing that's doing so well, I mean, I'd love to do a Greek restaurant. But I—I just don't—

AE: Yeah.

ZC: --have the time.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: I'm a gardener and a grandmother and I like to travel and—

[EDITED FOR CONTENT: About 4 minutes of the interview]

AE: Well, is there a note you'd like to end on? Or something you'd like to add that I haven't asked you?

ZC: I just take this as like, [short pause]—it's just been a gift.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: I mean, we—the—it's just been an absolute gift because I have so many people that thank me. Bring me Christmas presents. Thank me for being here and it's just [Zoë starts getting choked up]—and, um, I mean, I love it. I mean, like people say, "Why do you work so hard?" Well, I don't really work that hard. You know, I still get to go to the gym every day and, um, I probably, you know, won't ever quit.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: John wants me to—like when we get a lot of stores? He wants me to travel around, and I said, "I don't think so, John. I think I'm going to have to—I can't leave my customers." I mean, I have like people that come in here every day.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: You know, they—and when I'm not here? I had like some minor surgery in December? I mean, people were like, "Where's Zoë? Why isn't she here?" [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] You hear about it when you're gone!

ZC: I really love it. But I really do think that, um [short pause] it's because of my heritage that I was able to—to put it together. And to—and, you know, and we just want to keep up with—the main thing is the food—and to maintain the quality and to maintain the, um, consistency. You know, you don't come in here one day and it tastes one way, and the next day it tastes another.

AE: Yeah, people want to be able to rely on what they're getting. And know who they're getting it from.

ZC: Now, like Frank [Stitt]. You know, when I see people and I hear about people opening up restaurants, I'll say to myself, "Who in this city would think that they're going to compete with him."

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: I mean, Chris Hastings has done a great job at Hot and Hot, but there's only one Frank Stitt.

AE: Yeah.

ZC: I mean, he's just--

AE: He's legendary in this town.

ZC: Yeah, you have to really have a love and a feel for food to, um, to maintain. You know, and to stay. And I think—I'm just proud of John because that's what he's doing—running with the ball and not changing it.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: You know, trying to add and subtract and change.

AE: Um-hmm.

ZC: But anyway, I hope I helped you. I'm—

AE: Defintely! Definitely.

ZC: --sorry I was rude when you first called. I have so may people calling me.

AE: I understand. Well, I appreciate your time. Um, so thank you very much.

[END]