



**Andrew Collins
The Collins Bar
Birmingham, Alabama**

Date: February 8, 2017
Location: Mr. Collins's Home
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Technitype Transcription
Length: Fifty-four minutes
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am conducting an oral history interview with Andrew Collins. He is a former owner of Lyric Hot Dogs, which was started in 1957 by his father, John Collins. It is February 8th, 2017. We're sitting in Mr. Collins' loft. Where are we?

[00:00:23]

Andrew Collins: Third Avenue North.

[00:00:24]

Eric Velasco: On Third Avenue North in downtown Birmingham. He owns The Collins Bar, a freestyle cocktail bar on Second Avenue North, and he recently added his family's Lyric hot dogs to the bar's food menu. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Collins, and if you would, please also spell your name and give us your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:43]

Andrew Collins: My name is Andrew Collins, A-n-d-r-e-w C-o-l-l-i-n-s. Birthday, April 17th, 1949.

[00:00:52]

Eric Velasco: Now, your father is John Collins. Where is he from and when did he come here?

[00:00:59]

Andrew Collins: He's from a small village in Greece named Peleta. If you know George Sarris of the Fish Market, he's from Tsitalia, which is about fifteen minutes from Peleta, same region on top of a mountain. The base of the mountain is beaches; one's called Poulithra. Beautiful place, comfortable to be in.

[00:01:18]

Eric Velasco: Now, another well-known Greek restaurant family here is also from Peleta, the Koikos family.

[00:01:25]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:01:26]

Eric Velasco: Are you any kin to them?

[00:01:27]

Andrew Collins: I'm not related to him, but my dad knew his dad, so they knew each other. When my dad came, they knew each other, so they palled around and frequented each other's restaurants.

[00:01:39]

Eric Velasco: What was the family name back in Greece?

[00:01:41]

Andrew Collins: Kalogiannis.

[00:01:42]

Eric Velasco: Would you spell that for us, please?

[00:01:43]

Andrew Collins: It's K-a-l-o-g-i-a-n-n-i-s.

[00:01:47]

Eric Velasco: I never would have guessed that spelling.

[00:01:50]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. So when I'm in America, I'm Andrew Collins, and when I'm in Greece, I'm Andreas Kalogiannis.

[00:01:56]

Eric Velasco: That was another question I was going to ask, what your Greek name was.

[laughter] So how did the name get changed to Collins?

[00:02:02]

Andrew Collins: When my dad came over, he stayed with some of his uncles, the Grammas family, and when he was sixteen years old, they took him to open a bank account because he

went to work for them at Magic City Candy Company, and when they asked him his name, he told the banker, and he said, “Well, what is it in English?” And my dad didn’t know, so the uncle said, “Well, just put Collins down there.” So that’s how that ended up.

[00:02:28]

Eric Velasco: That’s a pretty close transliteration.

[00:02:29]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

[00:02:32]

Eric Velasco: When did he come here and why?

[00:02:35]

Andrew Collins: He came here in 1917. He just wanted to make a better life for himself. As a matter of fact, on the transcript of when he came over, it says he wanted to be a scholar, but he ended up working all his life. He didn’t have time to go to school once he got started. And he came to visit. He knew his uncles were here, so he came to stay with them, so he had a place to stay when he got here. It wasn’t like he was on the streets. He had a place to stay and a job.

[00:03:01]

Eric Velasco: The uncles were the Grammases?

[00:03:03]

Andrew Collins: Grammas family, yes.

[00:03:04]

Eric Velasco: Now, what were the names of the uncles?

[00:03:06]

Andrew Collins: Cameron, Pete, George, and Chris—well, not Cameron. It was Pete, George, and Chris.

[00:03:14]

Eric Velasco: Now, were they in the restaurant business?

[00:03:15]

Andrew Collins: No, they owned Magic City Candy Company, so they were making candy and distributing candy to places.

[00:03:20]

Eric Velasco: What kind of candy?

[00:03:21]

Andrew Collins: Just all kinds. They made chocolates, chocolate-covered cherries, stuff like that.

[00:03:26]

Eric Velasco: Where was that located?

[00:03:26]

Andrew Collins: It was downtown somewhere, because everything was downtown back then, but I don't remember the exact location because I think it had been closed by the time I was around. [Interviewer's note: Magic City Candy Co. was at 1730 First Ave. North.]

[00:03:35]

Eric Velasco: Now, your father, how old was he when he came here? He was pretty young.

[00:03:38]

Andrew Collins: He was sixteen.

[00:03:39]

Eric Velasco: Wow. So did he go to work for his uncles?

[00:03:45]

Andrew Collins: Yes, he went straight to work, almost.

[00:03:46]

Eric Velasco: And how long did he work there?

[00:03:49]

Andrew Collins: Probably quite a few years, probably fifteen, twenty years, maybe. I don't really know. He ended up in the restaurant business like to 1935, something like that.

[00:04:00]

Eric Velasco: And what restaurant was that and how did he come to own it?

[00:04:04]

Andrew Collins: It was The Steak Grill. It was on the corner of Third Avenue [North] and 17th Street, which is right on the corner of this block that I live at, and he didn't even know how to cook. He had to call one of his friends to ask him how to cook a pot roast. [*Laughs*]

[00:04:18]

Eric Velasco: So how did he get in the restaurant business?

[00:04:23]

Andrew Collins: It was vacant, and he just took it over. He just came in and took it over.

[00:04:28]

Eric Velasco: So he wanted to own a business?

[00:04:30]

Andrew Collins: Right, yes.

[00:04:33]

Eric Velasco: Did he pick restaurants because there were several others that he knew involved in restaurants?

[00:04:40]

Andrew Collins: I think he knew some of his friends that had restaurants. They were doing well, and so he saw this opportunity and he just got on it, didn't waste any time.

[00:04:49]

Eric Velasco: This would have been, what, about the mid-thirties, you said?

[00:04:52]

Andrew Collins: Mid-thirties, yeah.

[00:04:54]

Eric Velasco: Must have been tough opening up. I guess this would have been after the Depression.

[00:04:57]

Andrew Collins: He might have opened it before, because people always said he had a little money during the recession, during the Depression. He had a pinball machine, so that's where he made the money during the Depression. *[Laughs]*

[00:05:10]

Eric Velasco: Was this pinball machine in a business?

[00:05:14]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, I think it was in his restaurant. [*Laughs*]

[00:05:17]

Eric Velasco: Oh, that's great. So if you could only drink coffee, you could at least get some money off the pinball machine.

[00:05:24]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, that's it. That's it.

[00:05:26]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell me about that restaurant now. What kind of food did it serve?

[00:05:29]

Andrew Collins: It was a meat and three vegetables. At night it was a sit-down restaurant that still offered the meat and three. He had a liquor license so you could drink there. Wasn't a big place, probably sat forty or fifty people.

[00:05:43]

Eric Velasco: Now, the Farmers' Market used to be downtown. How far was it from that Farmers' Market?

[00:05:48]

Andrew Collins: I don't remember when the Farmers' Market was downtown.

[00:05:51]

Eric Velasco: It was over near Niki's Downtown.

[00:05:53]

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, so he was right here. He was on 17th Street and Third Avenue North, so that would be about 15th or 13th Street, so he was pretty close.

[Interviewer's note: The location for Niki's Downtown is Second Avenue North at 11th Street. According to George Sissa, who bought Niki's Downtown in 1988, the Birmingham Farmers Market was behind Niki's when it opened there in 1951. The farmer's market moved to its current site on Finley Avenue in 1956.]

[00:06:04]

Eric Velasco: Right. I would imagine that's where he would have gotten his vegetables.

[00:06:07]

Andrew Collins: Right, right, yeah, yeah.

[00:06:09]

Eric Velasco: So how long was that place open?

[00:06:12]

Andrew Collins: He closed it in 1968. Somebody was going to put a bank there, and it fell through, so they just tore it down. Now it's a parking lot.

[00:06:19]

Eric Velasco: Did he have any businesses before he opened Lyric?

[00:06:23]

Andrew Collins: Yes, he had the Steak Grill Restaurant, and then he had a—he ended up—I think 1950, he bought a little three-unit space in Panama City Beach, Florida, and by the time he sold it, it was thirty-five units instead of the three, so he built it up pretty good.

[00:06:43]

Eric Velasco: Now, there were other Greeks who had places down that way too. [Interviewer's note: In his 2004 oral history with the Southern Foodways Alliance, Aleck Choraitis, a Greek immigrant who bought Greek-founded Andrews Bar-B-Q and Gus' Hot Dogs circa 1970, said he and his brother were longtime owners of a 62-room motel in Panama City.]

[00:06:48]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:06:48]

Eric Velasco: Were they separate from your dad's?

[00:06:50]

Andrew Collins: Yes, they were mostly on Thomas Drive, I think, and his was right there on Laguna Beach by the Fontainebleau Terrace and Peaks and Georgia Terrace.

[00:07:01]

Eric Velasco: Good place to be.

[00:07:01]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, it was.

[00:07:02]

Eric Velasco: What was the name of that place?

[00:07:04]

Andrew Collins: It was Gulf View Court.

[00:07:05]

Eric Velasco: Gulf View Court.

[00:07:05]

Andrew Collins: Yes.

[00:07:08]

Eric Velasco: And was this a place where a lot of people from around here would go there?

[00:07:12]

Andrew Collins: Right. People here, Tennessee. It was a family style. You could sleep ten, fifteen people in there comfortably. He had hideaway beds and couches and bedrooms all over the place.

[00:07:23]

Eric Velasco: The whole family would gather.

[00:07:25]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, the whole family would come, aunts, uncles. They'd get two units, they'd have thirty people down there.

[00:07:31]

Eric Velasco: So it was kind of home away from home.

[00:07:34]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah, yeah, and they all knew everybody.

[00:07:36]

Eric Velasco: Large Greek clientele?

[00:07:39]

Andrew Collins: Had several Greeks come down there. A lot of the Greeks from Birmingham that knew him came down there and stayed. The Kontos family—I don't know if you know them—they used to go down there a lot.

[00:07:48]

Eric Velasco: These were the fruit people? [Interviewer's note: Alex Kontos Fruit Co. was founded in Birmingham in 1888. It is still in business, with a Kontos at the helm.]

[00:07:49]

Andrew Collins: Yes, Mr. Steve Kontos and his family.

[00:07:53]

Eric Velasco: How long did your dad have that place?

[00:07:56]

Andrew Collins: He opened it in 1950, closed it in about—I mean, not closed it, but he sold it about 1968, so you're talking about thirty-eight years. [Interviewer's note: That adds up to 18 years.]

[00:08:04]

Eric Velasco: He must have made a tidy profit with that expansion.

[00:08:06]

Andrew Collins: He did good. He did well.

[00:08:09]

Eric Velasco: Because that was the heyday for Panama City.

[00:08:10]

Andrew Collins: I know, yeah, that's when it was it. That's when it was it. It was every weekend you're packed.

[00:08:16]

Eric Velasco: So the Lyric opened, what, '57?

[00:08:20]

Andrew Collins: Fifty-seven, yeah.

[00:08:21]

Eric Velasco: And why did he open up a hot dog stand?

[00:08:24]

Andrew Collins: Well, he had a nephew coming over from Greece in kind of the same position as him, but he was older and my dad was going to put him in business. So he opened the place up for him, and the guy actually kind of goofed off a little bit too much, so my dad said, “No, this isn’t for you.” So he took it back over after a couple of years, and that’s how he ended up running it and all.

[00:08:48]

Eric Velasco: How did he manage to juggle three businesses at once?

[00:08:52]

Andrew Collins: That’s difficult. That was a difficult thing to do, but he had people at the hotel—at the motel that ran it, and they pretty much took care of it. We’d go down there on weekends and get to clean rooms and stuff. Then about two or three o’clock, he’d say, “Hey, let’s go to the beach,” and then we’d go to the beach for a couple hours.

[00:09:10]

Eric Velasco: Sweat equity.

[00:09:11]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, that’s pretty much it. So he would go down there about once or twice a month. You know, back then you were pretty much closed during the winter because you didn’t have all the Canadians coming in. They didn’t start till late sixties, I guess. So he had people

running it. Then when they closed the restaurant in '68, the people that were running it decided to retire, so him and my mother went down there and ran the motel for the summer, just the last three years, I think.

[00:09:44]

Eric Velasco: Did you get to go?

[00:09:45]

Andrew Collins: I got to go every once in a while, but I was working at the hot dog stand, so I didn't get to go too much, just on the weekends. [*Laughs*]

[00:09:49]

Eric Velasco: Did you have any siblings?

[00:09:52]

Andrew Collins: I've got two sisters.

[00:09:54]

Eric Velasco: And where are you in the order?

[00:09:57]

Andrew Collins: I'm the baby. My oldest sister was married and they moved around a bit in the corporate world, but my middle sister, Katherine, her husband owned Tony's Terrific Hot Dogs.

[00:10:11]

Eric Velasco: Katherine with a *K*?

[00:10:12]

Andrew Collins: Katherine with a *K*.

[00:10:14]

Eric Velasco: And what's Tony's name?

[00:10:16]

Andrew Collins: Tony Ippolito.

[00:10:17]

Eric Velasco: Spell that last name, please.

[00:10:18]

Andrew Collins: I-p-p-o-l-i-t-o.

[00:10:22]

Eric Velasco: Was he Greek or—

[00:10:23]

Andrew Collins: He's Italian.

[00:10:24]

Eric Velasco: That's what I thought.

[00:10:24]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, he's Italian.

[00:10:25]

Eric Velasco: So, some Italians, some non-Greeks ran them.

[00:10:29]

Andrew Collins: My dad helped him out. He showed him how to do it and stuff. [Interviewer's note: According to a media account when Tony's closed in 2009, Ippolito was a fire fighter when John Collins convinced him to help out at his hot dog stand. Ippolito opened Tony's Terrific Hot Dogs on Second Avenue North near 21st Street (now Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard) in 1980.]

[00:10:31]

Eric Velasco: What was your other sister's name?

[00:10:33]

Andrew Collins: Maria.

[00:10:34]

Eric Velasco: M-a-r-i-a?

[00:10:35]

Andrew Collins: Yes.

[00:10:36]

Eric Velasco: And what's her last name?

[00:10:38]

Andrew Collins: Orfanon, O-r-f-a-n-o-n.

[00:10:42]

Eric Velasco: So is she in Birmingham?

[00:10:45]

Andrew Collins: She's in Birmingham now, yeah. Her husband passed away about three years ago.

[00:10:49]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell me about your mother.

[00:10:51]

Andrew Collins: She was a member of the Derzis family.

[00:10:54]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the Derzis family.

[00:10:56]

Andrew Collins: The Derzis family lived in Norwood, and she had several brothers and sisters, and a lot of them lived on Norwood Circle, some of them on the Boulevard. They're a pretty prominent family here. My grandfather died, like, the first year I was born, so I didn't really know him. I think they had a fruit stand over there by Terminal Station.

[00:11:21]

Eric Velasco: And for people unfamiliar, would you tell us about the Norwood neighborhood?

[00:11:25]

Andrew Collins: Norwood neighborhood was a nice neighborhood. It had a lot of Greeks, Italians, you know, regular American people. It was a good mix of people, and it's just where everybody moved, for some reason.

[00:11:37]

Eric Velasco: Beautiful old homes.

[00:11:39]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, yeah, beautiful, nice. It was fun. It was a fun place to be.

[00:11:43]

Eric Velasco: And what was your grandfather's name?

[00:11:46]

Andrew Collins: Sam Derzis.

[00:11:48]

Eric Velasco: What was your mother's name?

[00:11:53]

Andrew Collins: Virginia. Virginia Derzis.

[00:11:54]

Eric Velasco: And let's see here. How did your parents meet?

[00:11:58]

Andrew Collins: Well, I guess my dad was at church, and my grandfather saw this immigrant, and I guess my dad was a little older, though, then. Yeah, he was older, because he was about nine years older than my mother. So he was inviting him over to eat on Sunday, and so he kind of got interested in his daughter and he asked him, “Is it all right if I date one of your daughters?”

He’s like, “Yeah.” And it surprised them because they thought he was going to date one of the older ones. And he said, “No, I want to date Virginia,” the younger one. [*Laughs*]

[00:12:28]

Eric Velasco: So which church was this, first of all?

[00:12:36]

Andrew Collins: Greek Orthodox church on Third.

[00:12:38]

Eric Velasco: And the name of it?

[00:12:39]

Andrew Collins: Holy Trinity. [Interviewer’s note: Birmingham’s Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church was founded in 1906. Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church was founded in 1933. The two merged as Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral in 1953.]

[00:12:40]

Eric Velasco: Did he kind of have in mind that he was going to play matchmaker at least for one of his daughters?

[00:12:49]

Andrew Collins: I guess. I guess he knew my dad was interested because he kept coming over. So I guess he knew. [laughter]

[00:12:59]

Eric Velasco: When were your parents married?

[00:13:02]

Andrew Collins: Gosh, I don't even remember. Probably would be seventy-five years ago, because their honeymoon was in Cuba, so it was when Cuba was still open. Actually, that's where I got that glass. (Collins points to a glass with water he provided the interviewer.) I don't really know. I guess it'd be about seventy-five years ago now.

[00:13:21]

Eric Velasco: When did you start working down at the Lyric?

[00:13:26]

Andrew Collins: I started working at the Lyric when I was thirteen. My dad would pick me up from school and I'd go down and pick up all the drink bottles, because we only had returnable

bottle drinks. So my job was to put all the drinks in the cartons. So I started there at thirteen after school, and then by the time I was fifteen, I was pretty much doing it all, doing everything there.

[00:13:46]

Eric Velasco: How often would you work there as a teen?

[00:13:48]

Andrew Collins: Every Friday and Saturday, usually during the week after school for a couple of hours.

[00:13:53]

Eric Velasco: Summers?

[00:13:54]

Andrew Collins: Summers I was there every day, yeah, pretty much.

[00:13:57]

Eric Velasco: Did you go to college?

[00:13:59]

Andrew Collins: I did not. I went into the navy. So I spent two years in the navy, came out, got home on a Friday. My dad was shaking me Monday morning, saying, “Get up. You’re going to the hot dog stand.” *[Laughs]* And that’s where I ended up.

[00:14:13]

Eric Velasco: Now, you were in the navy, what, ’69 to ’71, something like that?

[00:14:17]

Andrew Collins: Yes.

[00:14:18]

Eric Velasco: Were you in Vietnam?

[00:14:19]

Andrew Collins: No, I was not. My ship had just got back from Vietnam when I got on it, and we did a Med cruise, just general cruises, not much. Weren’t involved in any—we were kind of involved in some of the Israeli, Egyptian stuff, but we didn’t see anything. We were just off the coast.

[00:14:38]

Eric Velasco: Being present.

[00:14:39]

Andrew Collins: Yes, making a presence.

[00:14:40]

Eric Velasco: So sunburn was your major concern?

[00:14:43]

Andrew Collins: Pretty much, yeah, because that's what we did all day, laid around in the sun.

[00:14:48]

Eric Velasco: Now, was your father named for somebody?

[00:14:52]

Andrew Collins: He was named after his grandfather. I'm named after my grandfather. So my dad's father was John Andrew Collins, his father was Andrew John Collins, and I'm named Andrew John Collins after my grandfather.

[00:15:07]

Eric Velasco: That's a strong Greek tradition, isn't it?

[00:15:13]

Andrew Collins: It is. It's kind of not being so strong right now, though. They tend to stray away from that now.

[00:15:19]

Eric Velasco: Well, I would imagine at family reunions, you call a name, I mean, everybody turns their heads.

[00:15:22]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, everybody answers. Yeah, it's kind of like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you know.

[00:15:24]

Eric Velasco: I don't think we really got into this earlier. Why did your dad open up a hot dog stand as opposed to any other kind?

[00:15:36]

Andrew Collins: Any other restaurant?

[00:15:37]

Eric Velasco: You talked about the nephew.

[00:15:39]

Andrew Collins: He had some good friends that were in it, and this space was available down here on Third Avenue, so he talked to his friends. He knew they were doing decent, and it wasn't a hard business to run, because this guy could barely speak English. So he figured the

less people you have working for you, the better off he is. So you could run that place with two people.

[00:16:00]

Eric Velasco: Who were the friends who were in the hot dog business?

[00:16:03]

Andrew Collins: Gus Alexander. He used to have a Hot Dog King on 20th Street, and then he started Gus's Hot Dogs after he left Hot Dog King. Let's see. Gus Koutroulakis. [Interviewer's note: Koutroulakis ran Pete's Famous Hot Dogs from 1948 until the day he died in 2011.] He had plenty of them.

[00:16:16]

Eric Velasco: The Hot Dog King, I was unaware of that. So that was a place that Gus Alexander opened?

[00:16:23]

Andrew Collins: Right, yes.

[00:16:25]

Eric Velasco: So how long did he run that?

[00:16:27]

Andrew Collins: For a *long* time. I mean, he was already—when I knew him, he'd been there forever.

[00:16:32]

Eric Velasco: Was that open in the same time that Gus'—

[00:16:35]

Andrew Collins: No, the Gus' were not open yet.

[00:16:36]

Eric Velasco: So he shut the Hot Dog King down, but then opened up Gus'.

[00:16:40]

Andrew Collins: He sold the Hot Dog King, and he had a period that he had to wait to open up another place. Then he started opening up the Gus' Hot Dogs. He was right next to Cafe DuPont. [Interviewer's note: Café Dupont is at 113 20th St. N in downtown Birmingham.]

[00:16:48]

Eric Velasco: Did they have non-compete clauses back then?

[00:16:51]

Andrew Collins: I guess. [*Laughs*] Because this is like—I don't know when he started the Gus'.

[00:16:56]

Eric Velasco: Now, what it about Greeks and hot dogs here in Birmingham, especially back in that period? Because we're talking, what, the forties going into the fifties.

[00:17:06]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah. Something. I don't know what it was. I guess because they all that unique sauce, they had their sauce, their chili, and their ground beef for the special dog, and it appealed to the people of Birmingham more than anywhere, and I think they saw, "Well, this guy's doing it, I can do it." And it was close. You could be on the next block, still not have competing customers because there were so many people downtown.

[00:17:30]

Eric Velasco: In fact, it seemed like there was one on just about every block.

[00:17:34]

Andrew Collins: There was one. There was sometimes two and three. I think the block on 20th Street, between 20th and 19th, had Pete's Famous, Tom's Coneys, and the Downtowner on the one block.

[00:17:48]

Eric Velasco: I've seen Tom's Coneys spelled multiple ways.

[00:17:52]

Andrew Collins: Really?

[00:17:54]

Eric Velasco: Was it spelled with a *C* or a *K*?

[00:17:55]

Andrew Collins: You know, I don't know. I can't remember. I always thought it was a *C*.

[00:18:00]

Eric Velasco: That's what I always thought, too, but I've seen it spelled both ways, and I've not been able to find a photograph of their old sign or logo.

[00:18:09]

Andrew Collins: I'll have to see the guy. When I see the guy, I'll ask him how they spelled it.

[00:18:13]

Eric Velasco: Now, there really is a Birmingham dog just like there is a Detroit or Chicago dog.

[00:18:22]

Andrew Collins: Right, yes.

[00:18:23]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about it.

[00:18:23]

Andrew Collins: It's the hot dog with the mustard, onions, special sauce, and sauerkraut, and the sauce is what makes it, I guess, a Birmingham dog, because you can get mustard, onions, and kraut, but usually they put ketchup or some other topping on it.

[00:18:37]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about the sauce. What's special about the sauce?

[00:18:41]

Andrew Collins: The sauce, it's a unique individualized thing because each guy had his own sauce, and ours, I think, was better than most, but that's a matter of taste. So it's complicated. A lot of ingredients go in there and a certain cooking technique and thickening technique.

[00:19:01]

Eric Velasco: How do you make the sauce?

[00:19:02]

Andrew Collins: I make it just like my dad did. I cook it here. (Indicates the kitchen in his loft.) Cook it for about four or five hours, then it's done.

[00:19:12]

Eric Velasco: Tomato sauce?

[00:19:14]

Andrew Collins: There's some tomato product in it. [*Laughs*]

[00:19:16]

Eric Velasco: What kind of spices do you put in it?

[00:19:21]

Andrew Collins: Just general, you know, garlic, salt, pepper, all that stuff. It's a pretty secret recipe. [*Laughs*]

[00:19:28]

Eric Velasco: I'm gathering as much. How would the Lyric prepare hot dogs? How would your dad, and then later you, prepare hot dogs?

[00:19:38]

Andrew Collins: We always grilled them. We never boiled them. They're grilled, and then we had a steamer to keep our buns warm and moist and soft. So when you got a hot dog, you put the hot dog, mustard, onions, kraut, and then the sauce on top of it, but they were always grilled. They were never boiled.

[00:19:54]

Eric Velasco: Any special dog?

[00:19:58]

Andrew Collins: Well, we used Kent Coneys [phonetic] from Mitza [phonetic]. It's an all-meat, no filler, no artificial color on it, and it's just a pretty high-quality dog. Then we had a big hot dog that was a quarter-pound that was all beef, because a lot of people didn't eat pork, so we offered that for those guys.

[00:20:21]

Eric Velasco: How many different kinds of hot dogs would you offer there?

[00:20:25]

Andrew Collins: We had the hot dog, chili dog, special dog, slaw dog. Then you get them to add cheese on them or whatever you wanted.

[00:20:36]

Eric Velasco: So, variations on that classic theme.

[00:20:37]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and then we served hamburgers too.

[00:20:40]

Eric Velasco: Breakfast?

[00:20:42]

Andrew Collins: Yes. Now, at the old Lyric, before I expanded it to the sit-down place, we only did like sandwiches on hamburger buns, but at the Lyric Hot Dogs & Grill, we used to do a full breakfast. We had grits, hash browns, eggs to order, whole works.

[00:21:00]

Eric Velasco: Now, where was the original?

[00:21:01]

Andrew Collins: The original was 1808 Third Avenue North, and the remodel was still 1808 Third Avenue North. We just expanded it, put in seating and new kitchen, bathrooms, all that. The original was seven feet-by-thirty feet.

[00:21:19]

Eric Velasco: One of those typical—

[00:21:20]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, 210 square feet, yeah. [*Laughs*]

[00:21:23]

Eric Velasco: Like a closet.

[00:21:25]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, pretty much.

[00:21:27]

Eric Velasco: So just to kind of draw a visual for people, the prep area would be about half of the available space.

[00:21:35]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah.

[00:21:37]

Eric Velasco: And then, what, people would have about five, six feet at best?

[00:21:40]

Andrew Collins: About ten. If we didn't have any seats, you could just stand up.

[00:21:43]

Eric Velasco: So would people take it with them more?

[00:21:47]

Andrew Collins: A lot of them would take it with them, but, no, people liked sitting there. We had a TV. They'd stand there and watch TV, talk. It was like a gathering place too. You're just so close, you've got to talk to somebody next to you.

[00:21:59]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the building it was in.

[00:22:00]

Andrew Collins: It was in the Lyric Theatre Building. Where the Lyric Theatre is now, they had an office section, and we were in the office section on the ground floor.

[00:22:08]

Eric Velasco: And the Lyric Theatre originally was what?

[00:22:09]

Andrew Collins: It was a vaudeville theater.

[00:22:13]

Eric Velasco: This goes back, what, to the 1920s or so or earlier?

[00:22:15]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, yeah. [Interviewer’s note: the Lyric Theatre opened in 1914, fell into disrepair in the 1970s and reopened as an entertainment venue in 2016 after a restoration.]

[00:22:19]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell us a little bit about your dad. What was he like? What was his personality like?

[00:22:24]

Andrew Collins: He was kind of gruff but funny. He had a good sense of humor, got along well with everybody. He was a fun guy. He was always trying to give me good tips. I think he did a pretty good job.

[00:22:38]

Eric Velasco: How receptive were you to these tips as a young man?

[00:22:41]

Andrew Collins: As a young man, I kind of wasn’t real—but now I’m like, “Yeah, I should have listened to him sooner. I’d have been a lot better off.” [*Laughs*]

[00:22:48]

Eric Velasco: At what point did your dad start making sense?

[00:22:51]

Andrew Collins: I was about thirty, I guess, thirty-five. *[Laughs]*

[00:22:54]

Eric Velasco: That's not bad.

[00:22:57]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, not bad. Not bad.

[00:22:59]

Eric Velasco: You were well into the restaurant at that point.

[00:23:02]

Andrew Collins: Right. Yeah, we were working together, so you can imagine that.

[00:23:05]

Eric Velasco: How long did you two work together?

[00:23:08]

Andrew Collins: Probably ten years, ten, fifteen years.

[00:23:14]

Eric Velasco: Did he retire?

[00:23:15]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, he retired.

[00:23:19]

Eric Velasco: Tell us a little bit about the customers that you guys had, about the clientele.

What kind of people were they?

[00:23:25]

Andrew Collins: We would wait on everybody. Homeless people would come in and buy a sandwich, or president of Alabama Power Company would come in and buy sandwiches. So we waited on pretty much everybody. We had a good crew coming in, a good mix. A lot of the ladies that work in these houses would come in *every* morning. [Interviewer's note: He is referring to maids and other domestic workers for private employers.]

They were great customers of ours. I see them still today out on the street now. They start hollering at me. [*Laughs*]

[00:23:48]

Eric Velasco: I guess one of the great things about hot dogs is that's something anybody could afford to have.

[00:23:56]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah. I think they're just a little over two dollars now at the average hot dog stand.

[00:24:07]

Eric Velasco: You were downtown in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. What did you see? What did you experience?

[00:24:14]

Andrew Collins: I didn't see too much of them. I was like fourteen, fifteen years old, so when stuff was going on, I wasn't here. I was either at school or at home. So I didn't really actually see—at nights we'd see demonstrations, but they were always peaceful demonstrations. I never saw any of the violence or—

[00:24:32]

Eric Velasco: Did your dad ever talk about what he saw? Because some of those marches were probably right outside his door.

[00:24:37]

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah. He saw them, yeah, but we were Greek, so we were kind of—you know, like everybody says, you know, “Are you Ku Klux Klan?” I'm like, “No, they didn't like us, just like they didn't like you.”

[00:24:49]

Eric Velasco: Yeah, there was a lot of problem with the Klan, especially back early on when your dad was here.

[00:24:54]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah, yeah.

[00:24:56]

Eric Velasco: Did he have any encounters? Did he have any stories?

[00:24:59]

Andrew Collins: He never had a problem with them, I guess because he was always working and doing so well that they didn't bother him, but I imagine they bothered some people.

[00:25:11]

Eric Velasco: Especially as we start to get more into the fifties and sixties, how are Greeks viewed, especially by the white society?

[00:25:21]

Andrew Collins: I think we're viewed as equals, pretty much. I've got a lot of friends that are not Greek. They're proud to be friends of mine. I'm proud to be friends of them.

[00:25:32]

Eric Velasco: Well, that's one of the things I've found from talking to old-timers from that era is there's a lot of respect for the Greeks, especially the entrepreneurs in general, the restaurateurs in general in this community.

[00:25:45]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:25:47]

Eric Velasco: Why do you think that is?

[00:25:49]

Andrew Collins: I think it's because of their hard work. Everybody knows they work hard, and they probably know they play hard too. So they get to see both sides of us because they come into our job and see us working, but then they're also out with us and they see how we play. So I think they respect both ends of that, that we can do both.

[00:26:07]

Eric Velasco: You said your dad could be gruff but liked to cut up.

[00:26:11]

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah.

[00:26:12]

Eric Velasco: When customers would come in, would he—there were some, like Gus, who were known for just giving them grief. There were some who like, you know, it's your best friend and—

[00:26:20]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Well, that's the way my dad was. He didn't give anybody grief. He was always real nice to them and talked to them. He knew a lot of people from the Steak Grill, and then when he moved there, they just kind of followed him because they knew he did a great job.

[00:26:34]

Eric Velasco: And by grief, of course, I mean, just in a—

[00:26:37]

Andrew Collins: Kidding with them.

[00:26:37]

Eric Velasco: —kidding sort of way.

[00:26:38]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, he had some of those he would kid with, but he was pretty serious.

[00:26:43]

Eric Velasco: Now, at Steak Grill were other Greeks, especially immigrants, coming to work there?

[00:26:52]

Andrew Collins: He had a partner. My mother's sister's husband came to work with him.

[00:26:59]

Eric Velasco: Was he Greek?

[00:27:00]

Andrew Collins: He was Greek, yeah. Tom Bonduris. [*Laughs*] They're all interrelated.

[00:27:06]

Eric Velasco: Now, Tom Bonduris, how is he kin to the original Bright Star Tom Bonduris?

[00:27:11]

Andrew Collins: He's cousins to them. He was a cousin.

[00:27:15]

Eric Velasco: Did he come here from Peleta?

[00:27:16]

Andrew Collins: Yes, he did. So it was the Bondurises. The Grammas weren't from Peleta; they were from Igios Demetri.

[00:27:25]

Eric Velasco: Could you spell that for me, please?

[00:27:27]

Andrew Collins: Let's see. I think it's I-g-i-o-s D-e-m-e-t-r-i.

[00:27:36]

Eric Velasco: Was it part of that little cluster of villages?

[00:27:38]

Andrew Collins: It's close. It's about an hour and a half away. So they're a good ways off. But that was my grandmother's part of the family was the Grammas. [Interviewer's note: He probably is referring to Agios Dimitros, an Athens suburb. Members of the Grammas family in Birmingham trace their roots to Agios Dimitros.]

[00:27:47]

Eric Velasco: And then she married into Derzises.

[00:27:50]

Andrew Collins: No, she married into my dad's family. She married my grandfather's.

[*Laughs*] It gets complicated.

[00:27:57]

Eric Velasco: Yeah. I once wrote that the Greek family tree has many branches, but the roots are all intertwined.

[00:28:03]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah, yeah. That's exactly right.

[00:28:08]

Eric Velasco: So what did your Tom Bonduris do?

[00:28:13]

Andrew Collins: He came to work for my dad and worked for him. Then during the war, he went off and he went to the war for a year or two. Then when he came back, my dad had his share of the money still there waiting on him when he came back. So he was in pretty good shape. He still gave him his share.

[00:28:33]

Eric Velasco: That's a nice thing to come home to.

[00:28:36]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. So my dad was a pretty honest guy.

[00:28:38]

Eric Velasco: So did he go off and start a business with that?

[00:28:41]

Andrew Collins: No, he came back and they worked together till they closed it.

[00:28:44]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[00:28:45]

Andrew Collins: So they were partners till they closed. They were friends, partners. I don't know that you see too much of that anymore that a partner can be your friend.

[00:28:53]

Eric Velasco: That must be a special experience.

[00:28:57]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, it was. They got along great.

[00:29:07]

Eric Velasco: Your parents met basically through the church. Did you spend much time at the church?

[00:29:14]

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah. As a kid, I was always in church.

[00:29:15]

Eric Velasco: Were y'all an every-Sunday kind of family?

[00:29:19]

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah, yeah. Every Sunday. And went to Greek School after school, too, learned Greek.

[00:29:25]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about that.

[00:29:26]

Andrew Collins: That was an everyday affair. We'd get out of school and we're on our way to Greek School to learn Greek, which actually has paid off. I was in Greece in August and I could actually speak Greek. But we all went, you know, everybody. That was also like a party, too, because I was in Homewood and all my cousins were in Norwood, so we would kind of meet

and have our little good time too. [Interviewer's note: Homewood is a suburban municipality adjacent to and south of Birmingham.]

[00:29:51]

Eric Velasco: Did you speak Greek at home?

[00:29:52]

Andrew Collins: Not much. My mother and father would speak it, but not to me. They would speak English.

[00:29:58]

Eric Velasco: And I guess with their parents they would speak Greek mostly.

[00:30:01]

Andrew Collins: They would speak Greek, yeah.

[00:30:04]

Eric Velasco: When you were young, would you go to Greece?

[00:30:09]

Andrew Collins: No. I went when I was thirteen years old. My dad sent me and my sister over there.

[00:30:16]

Eric Velasco: Was it one of those, with so many businesses, he didn't have time?

[00:30:19]

Andrew Collins: Well, yeah. He never really had time. He went back. Like in the sixties, he went back, but I think his parents were dead by the time he went back. He went once while they were alive. After he left, I think it was like the twenties or thirties, he went back. It was like ten or fifteen years after he was here before he went back, and then he never went back while they were alive.

[00:30:43]

Eric Velasco: Did he ever talk about whether he wished he could have gone more often?

[00:30:47]

Andrew Collins: Not really, no. I think he knew when he came over, he was here for the long haul. He would always send money over there, though. He took care of—

[00:31:00]

Eric Velasco: That's another fairly common thing [unclear].

[00:31:02]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah, yeah. It still is. They still send money over to the relatives.

[00:31:06]

Eric Velasco: Also for civic purposes?

[00:31:09]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah. My dad donated a lot of—they redid the church in Peleta. My dad donated a lot of money for that so that they could build a new church, and they've got his name up on the wall and stuff, people that donated.

[00:31:20]

Eric Velasco: Why did he send you and your sisters there?

[00:31:26]

Andrew Collins: The church had a group going, and it was fairly reasonable, so he sent us for—we were there for almost three months, but I got to know all my relatives. So that's fun, because when I go back, I see those same people.

[00:31:39]

Eric Velasco: Did everybody go to their home villages?

[00:31:41]

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Everybody goes. Once they got to Athens, everybody split. Everybody split up and went to their little villages.

[00:31:49]

Eric Velasco: Oh, neat. Now, as you got more into adulthood, how often have you gone back?

[00:31:58]

Andrew Collins: I was there when I was in the navy. That's in like 1971, '70. And my whole family went in 2007, and my kids had never been. They didn't know any of these people. But I still have first cousins over there, so we stayed with them. They had a blast. I went back this summer, and we're planning on—this past summer I went back, and we're planning on doing another family trip, not this summer but next summer, taking the whole crew. So that should be interesting.

[00:32:40]

Eric Velasco: Now, when you were there in the navy, did you take any of your shipmates with you?

[00:32:45]

Andrew Collins: Well, we didn't get to go to the village. I got to see one cousin that lived in Athens. Because we were only there for three days, so we didn't get to see much of him.

[00:32:58]

Eric Velasco: What other relatives do you have in this area? I saw something, you're related to the Graphos family?

[00:33:06]

Andrew Collins: Graphos family, yeah.

[00:33:07]

Eric Velasco: And who are they?

[00:33:08]

Andrew Collins: Derzis. Sammy Derzis runs Golden Rule in Irondale. He's my first cousin.

The Graphos family.

[00:33:14]

Eric Velasco: This is Pete and Sammy and Jimmy.

[00:33:17]

Andrew Collins: Pete, Sammy, and Jimmy, yes.

[00:33:18]

Eric Velasco: And what's their claim to fame?

[00:33:21]

Andrew Collins: They started Sneaky Pete's. [Interviewer's note: Sneaky Pete's is another famous Birmingham hot dog restaurant, founded by Pete Graphos in 1966. It grew to 24 stores,

including locations owned by twins Sam and Jimmy Graphos, before Pete sold the chain to non-Greek owners in 1986.]

When my dad's nephew left the Lyric, their dad was running the Lyric for my dad, and Jimmy came to work for him also, so they were running my dad's hot dog stand while he was doing the beach and the restaurant.

[00:33:41]

Eric Velasco: What's their dad's name?

[00:33:42]

Andrew Collins: Ted. Ted Graphos.

[00:33:44]

Eric Velasco: Any other—

[00:33:48]

Andrew Collins: Well, that's one of the reasons after I got out of the navy and went to work for the hot dog stand, it wasn't long, maybe a month or two months, when Jimmy took me aside and said, "Hey, we're getting ready to go open up a few hot dog stands." He said, "So I'm going to be leaving, so it's going to be you here." So at that point, my dad sold it to me. That's when I took it over.

[00:34:10]

Eric Velasco: How did that conversation happen?

[00:34:15]

Andrew Collins: Well, me and Jimmy were really tight. When my parents were at the motel, Jimmy would stay at their house to keep watch over me, which that didn't work well. *[Laughs]* He was like a party guy anyway.

[00:34:33]

Eric Velasco: So you ended up watching him?

[00:34:35]

Andrew Collins: Well, we used to party together, because I was like eighteen, he was like twenty-two, so it wasn't that bad.

[00:34:42]

Eric Velasco: That was back in the day when—

[00:34:44]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, you could have a good time.

[00:34:45]

Eric Velasco: Drinking was that age too.

[00:34:46]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah, yeah. And so, you know, he just pulled me aside one day and said, “Hey, we’re going to open up this place. I’m going to work another month.” He said, “Then you take over.” He said, “I’ve already talked to your dad.” So it went well. I mean, it was an easy transition. There was never any hard feelings or anything.

[00:35:00]

Eric Velasco: And the places they opened eventually became Sammy’s Super Samwiches and Jimmy’s Hot Dogs.

[00:35:06]

Andrew Collins: Right, yes, yes. Jimmy passed away recently, you know.

[00:35:09]

Eric Velasco: Right.

[00:35:10]

Andrew Collins: And Sammy’s still around.

[00:35:12]

Eric Velasco: We’re planning on talking at some point.

[00:35:15]

Andrew Collins: All right. Good, good.

[00:35:24]

Eric Velasco: How did you meet your wife?

[00:35:25]

Andrew Collins: Actually, we knew each other in high school, but we didn't date in high school. We used to run in the same crowds. We'd see each other and talk. And then after I got out of the navy, I was at a party and she was there, so we were talking. I said, "Why don't we go out?" So that's how that ended up. So we went out and dated about a year and a half and then got married.

[00:35:48]

Eric Velasco: What's her name?

[00:35:49]

Andrew Collins: Cathy.

[00:35:50]

Eric Velasco: Cathy with a *K* or a *C*?

[00:35:51]

Andrew Collins: Cathy with a C.

[00:35:52]

Eric Velasco: C-a-t-h-y, Cathy.

[00:35:54]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, C-a-t-h—

[00:35:55]

Eric Velasco: What's her maiden name?

[00:35:56]

Andrew Collins: Her maiden name was Conville, C-o-n-v-i-l-l-e.

[00:36:00]

Eric Velasco: So she wasn't Greek.

[00:36:02]

Andrew Collins: She was not Greek. She passed away in 2007, I think.

[00:36:09]

Eric Velasco: And you have daughters?

[00:36:11]

Andrew Collins: I have two daughters, Leah Massengale, L-e-a-h M-a-s-s-e-n-g-a-l-e, and then Jennifer Armstrong, J-e-n-n-i-f-e-r A-r-m-s-t-r-o-n-g.

[00:36:28]

Eric Velasco: And what do they do?

[00:36:29]

Andrew Collins: Leah works for McGriff, Seibels (& Williams) insurance company and BB&T Bank, and Jennifer teaches school in Montgomery. She teaches at a magnet school.

[00:36:37]

Eric Velasco: She's been teaching for a while, hasn't she?

[00:36:39]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, she's about fifteen years in now.

[00:36:41]

Eric Velasco: Did they ever work for you?

[00:36:43]

Andrew Collins: Yes, they always worked for us. Even up to the end when there were dance recitals at the Alabama Theatre, they would all come work, the daughters, the husbands,

everybody. [Interviewer's note: The Alabama Theatre, a restored 1920-era ornate movie theater, is less than a block from the old Lyric hot dog shop.] Leah worked there a lot, and Jennifer worked there some, but I'm glad—well, I'm not glad, but neither one of them chose the path, so that's okay too. That's not to say they never will.

[00:37:12]

Eric Velasco: You said you're glad, you're not glad.

[00:37:14]

Andrew Collins: I'm kind of glad, but then not, because, you know, it's best to have a job than to work for yourself, because you never get off when you work for yourself.

[00:37:22]

Eric Velasco: What kind of days would you put in?

[00:37:25]

Andrew Collins: Oh, I was working from—well, at the time I took it over, we were open till seven o'clock because downtown was open. [Interviewer's note: Several downtown hot dog shop owners make this point. Before suburbanization, downtown streets stayed busy all day and all night. But the explosive growth of suburbs in the 1980s and 1990s left the central business district all but vacant after offices closed. Construction of lofts starting in the 2000s has made downtown streets much livelier at night, although not nearly to the pre-suburb level.]

So I worked sometimes from seven to seven. That's seven in the morning to seven at night. Towards the end there, I was going in at seven and getting off at four, so it wasn't so bad.

[00:37:42]

Eric Velasco: Did your wife work outside the home?

[00:37:44]

Andrew Collins: She did not. She was working for Central Bank when we married and she raised the kids, and then when we remodeled the hot dog stand in 1995, that's when she started working down there. So she worked with me about twelve years before she passed away.

[00:37:59]

Eric Velasco: How was that?

[00:38:01]

Andrew Collins: Well, we only had one run-in, and she told me, pretty much set me straight, that she could just walk out if she wanted to. She didn't have to be there. So she told me stay on my side of the restaurant. She'd take the cash register. I said, "Okay." That's it.

[00:38:16]

Eric Velasco: Did she make it clear there would not be a second run-in?

[00:38:19]

Andrew Collins: Right, she did. Very clear.

[00:38:21]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like a very strong woman.

[00:38:23]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, she was. A great lady. I miss her a lot.

[00:38:33]

Eric Velasco: Now, tell us about how the Lyric came to an end.

[00:38:38]

Andrew Collins: Well, by this time, I had already opened the bar, and there were always ramblings about the Lyric (Theatre) being remodeled. So one day, they came in with a ninety-day notice to vacate, so that pretty much put the end to it.

[00:38:55]

Eric Velasco: This was late 2013?

[00:38:58]

Andrew Collins: Right. January was my move-out date, January 2013. [Interviewer's note: According to contemporary news reports, the Lyric hot dog restaurant was given notice to vacate by the end of January 2014 to vacate, but closed on Dec. 31, 2013. Andrew Collins confirms this later in this interview.]

[00:39:05]

Eric Velasco: Why did you choose to close rather than finding a new location?

[00:39:10]

Andrew Collins: By then I had the bar, and the Lyric was taking a lot of time, and then it's a little bit of money to open up a restaurant. If anybody's ever opened one, it always takes a lot more than you think it is, and I just didn't really want to go into debt again. So by then, I had this loft and I was working on it, finishing it up.

[00:39:30]

Eric Velasco: And had your wife passed by then?

[00:39:34]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, she passed before we got to move in here. This is her design and everything, but she never got to live here.

[00:39:41]

Eric Velasco: This is a beautiful space, this loft.

[00:39:43]

Andrew Collins: Thank you. Thank you.

[00:39:44]

Eric Velasco: Absolutely gorgeous. [Interviewer’s note: pause and brief exchange while Collins’ cat laps water out of the glass from his parents’ honeymoon in Cuba.]

So how did you come to open The Collins?

[00:40:00]

Andrew Collins: Well, I was looking to open a bar. I was actually looking at the space on 20th Street where the Game Room is for Paramount, and then the Metro Bar came available, and I knew I could get it at a good price and still be able to remodel it and not spend as much money as I would going from scratch. So that’s how I ended up there. [Interviewer’s note: The Paramount is a bar, grill and arcade at the corner of Second Avenue North and 20th Street.]

[00:40:29]

Eric Velasco: What was attractive about opening a bar?

[00:40:32]

Andrew Collins: Well, I’ve been in them all my life, so I thought it would be fun to kind of own one, but it’s a lot of work, a lot more work than I thought.

[00:40:41]

Eric Velasco: Easier to be in them than to run them?

[00:40:43]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Oh, it's even better to be a customer, yeah.

[00:40:48]

Eric Velasco: The Collins Bar is unique. Tell us about it.

[00:40:52]

Andrew Collins: Well, it's unique decor.

[00:40:55]

Eric Velasco: Describe the interior.

[00:40:57]

Andrew Collins: We have the Periodic Table of Elements that's actually elements of Birmingham. It's famous people, famous restaurants, areas. We have the paper airplanes hanging from the ceiling. We have eclectic lights. We have round booths where people can carry on conversations. We don't have live music, so it's not too terribly loud in there. When you have loud music, you can't even hear yourself talk, so it's almost impossible to carry on a conversation.

[00:41:25]

Eric Velasco: Now, you have a stage and a pretty interesting lineup of promised acts.

[Interviewer's note: They are listed on a board next to the small stage.]

[00:41:30]

Andrew Collins: Right. Most of them are defunct bands that don't play much together. Actually, they're on the menu boards from the Lyric, so those were my menu boards when I had the restaurant, so we decided to put them to use.

[00:41:55]

Eric Velasco: The other interesting thing about—and one more thing, going back to the Periodic Table, you have, what, two or three squares on it? I think the Lyric is one of the elements on there.

[00:42:03]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:42:05]

Eric Velasco: You're one of the elements [*Unclear*].

[00:42:06]

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

[00:42:07]

Eric Velasco: You're one of the top two elements, I believe.

[00:42:11]

Andrew Collins: I guess. [*Laughs*]

[00:42:14]

Eric Velasco: Better be, eh?

[00:42:14]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, that's the way it should be. And we add and subtract people sometimes. If somebody new is in town and they're doing well, we'll put them up there. We have Bamboo and El Barrio. [Interviewer's note: The Periodic Table, created by a former manager, is mounted behind the bar at The Collins, with squares listing locally well-known people and places.]

[00:42:26]

Eric Velasco: These are both restaurants on Second Avenue North.

[00:42:28]

Andrew Collins: Right, yes.

[00:42:30]

Eric Velasco: Which are, what, about a block away?

[00:42:31]

Andrew Collins: A block away. Yeah, about almost a block, yeah, pretty close.

[00:42:36]

Eric Velasco: This downtown area really has undergone a resurgence. You've seen it ebb and flow in your time here.

[00:42:46]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah.

[00:42:47]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about how downtown's kind of changed over the years.

[00:42:51]

Andrew Collins: It's changed a lot. I mean, five years ago, six years ago, it was not near what it is now. It started changing pretty quick. Once people saw that I was doing business and Bamboo's doing business and El Barrio and then Paramount, and people started coming downtown, especially the young kids. They have no fear of coming downtown. It's not a scary place, actually, at night. It's people walking all over the place. You don't realize it, but people are walking all up and down the streets all hours of the night.

[00:43:24]

Eric Velasco: A lot more residents downtown.

[00:43:26]

Andrew Collins: A lot of residents now.

[00:43:27]

Eric Velasco: Lofts like this.

[00:43:27]

Andrew Collins: Lofts, yeah. A lot of people living here, coffee shops. People are starting to open earlier, close later. So it's starting to be a fun place to live.

[00:43:38]

Eric Velasco: When you opened Collins Bar, had you planned on running both places? Did you know the Lyric was—

[00:43:45]

Andrew Collins: I did not know. Yeah, I opened it. I was running both of them at one time because I bought the restaurant—see, I bought the bar in 2012, and then we changed it in 2013 to The Collins Bar.

[00:44:04]

Eric Velasco: What month, do you remember?

[00:44:06]

Andrew Collins: It was September. Actually, I bought it—when did I buy that? In '13 [2013]? I guess I had to get out in '14. I bought it January 2013 and I was out of the Lyric by 2014.

[00:44:24]

Eric Velasco: Now, at that point, especially toward the latter years of the Lyric, downtown, especially that part of downtown, was fairly dead after five o'clock.

[00:44:34]

Andrew Collins: Right, yeah. Except for the bars.

[00:44:38]

Eric Velasco: So did you see the bar as kind of “I’m done one place. I’m going to go on to the next”?

[00:44:44]

Andrew Collins: Well, at the time, I was planning on running both of them because it was doable. I had managers. But I would work during the day at the Lyric and then go down there till midnight, then get up the next day at six and go to work at the Lyric. So it was not a whole lot of free time there. But it would've been hard, I think, now looking back on it, to continue on that way.

[00:45:08]

Eric Velasco: The other real unique thing about The Collins Bar, at least in this city, is that there really is no bar menu.

[00:45:16]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:45:17]

Eric Velasco: Tell me how that works.

[00:45:18]

Andrew Collins: So you just come in and tell them what you like, what flavors you like, or to fix you something exotic, and the bartenders'll do it. I have the best bartenders in Birmingham. They're good. They're intuitive. They'll talk to you for a little bit and kind of get your personality and what flavors you like, and they'll make you a good drink. They do the classics very well and they have variations of the classics, so that comes into play a lot. We have a lot of the good bourbons. So we're kind of the place to go to if you want a good drink.

[00:45:53]

Eric Velasco: Tiki Night on Tuesdays?

[00:45:55]

Andrew Collins: Tiki Night every once in a while. They're not every Tuesday, but when we do have them, they're on Tuesdays.

[00:46:00]

Eric Velasco: Your bar menu, the food menu is pretty interesting to begin with.

[00:46:07]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:46:08]

Eric Velasco: What were some of the things early on? The pigs in a blanket.

[00:46:11]

Andrew Collins: Pigs in a blanket. We had grilled cheese with bacon jam. We had won tons, some kind of Greek won ton with Greek sausage in it, had potstickers, and now we're down to grilled cheese, pigs in a blanket, and the hot dogs, the Lyric hog dogs.

[00:46:30]

Eric Velasco: Pigs in a blanket are pork-belly pigs in a blanket.

[00:46:32]

Andrew Collins: Pork-belly, yes, pork-belly pigs in a blanket.

[00:46:34]

Eric Velasco: Were the Greek potstickers—

[00:46:35]

Andrew Collins: They were fairly good.

[00:46:37]

Eric Velasco: —a tribute to your heritage or—?

[00:46:39]

Andrew Collins: No. It one of the chefs I had. I guess she decided to do a Greek potsticker. She saw a recipe for Greek sausage, and they were actually pretty good.

[00:46:48]

Eric Velasco: What goes into a Greek sausage?

[00:46:49]

Andrew Collins: It's got some little basil, some little caraway seeds, I think, and it's kind of like an Italian sausage but a little different flavor. I've never made one, so I don't know.

[00:47:06]

Eric Velasco: Now, recently the Lyric Dog returned.

[00:47:09]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:47:10]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about how that came to be and why you decided to do that.

[00:47:13]

Andrew Collins: Well, I'd been wanting to do it, and then my manager said, "You know, we need to try that. People are starting to ask, "How come you don't have hot dogs here?" So we decided to try that and it's going real well. So we have the hot dog, the chili dog, the slaw dog, and the special dog.

[00:47:27]

Eric Velasco: Still the same—

[00:47:29]

Andrew Collins: Still the same sauce, same chili, same hot beef.

[00:47:32]

Eric Velasco: How often do you make the sauce?

[00:47:34]

Andrew Collins: Probably about once every two weeks.

[00:47:36]

Eric Velasco: How much do you make at a time?

[00:47:38]

Andrew Collins: Six gallons.

[00:47:39]

Eric Velasco: I'll not come back to ask you to share the recipe.

[00:47:43]

Andrew Collins: All right. [*Laughs*]

[00:47:45]

Eric Velasco: So six gallons will get you through a couple of weeks?

[00:47:47]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, usually.

[00:47:49]

Eric Velasco: What kind of reception has that gotten?

[00:47:55]

Andrew Collins: Pretty good. People are enjoying it. I'm getting some of my old Lyric customers in there wanting to eat hot dogs. Actually, the first day, they were pulling on the door at noon, but we don't open for lunch, so they were kind of disappointed. But most of them have come back in the evening and tried them out.

[00:48:10]

Eric Velasco: So have you thought of opening for lunch now?

[00:48:13]

Andrew Collins: No. That makes too long of a day.

[00:48:19]

Eric Velasco: So how would you summarize the impact that Greeks have had on Birmingham's food scene?

[00:48:26]

Andrew Collins: I think it's strong. You have some of the best restaurants in Birmingham are owned by Greeks, so it's hard to not say they're a strong presence and a good presence, because all their food is quality stuff. You know, they use quality ingredients, and that's what makes it best. That's what happened with my dad's hot dogs. He'd use the quality. He'd use Hunt's products, you know, a big-name product, never used the cheap stuff. So I think the quality of the food says as much as the personality of the people that own the restaurants.

[00:49:01]

Eric Velasco: You're kind of at the forefront of a wave. We're seeing fewer and fewer immigrants from Greece running restaurants and more sons, sometimes daughters, but mostly sons running restaurants. Do you think we'll see another wave? It seems like we've had about three main waves of Greeks coming through.

[00:49:24]

Andrew Collins: Most of them now are well educated. They're way more educated than my dad and some of those early immigrants were. So now they have college educations and they're wanting jobs. They're not wanting to come over here and open their own business. They want to come over here and get a good job. So I think that's what we're seeing. Now, they're still coming over here, but they're just coming for different reasons.

[00:49:45]

Eric Velasco: And as we've seen in your own family, we focus a lot on restaurateurs here who are Greek, but just about every profession has some person with a Greek surname or heritage.

[00:50:02]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Well, a lot of these kids saw how hard their fathers worked, so they went on to become lawyers and doctors. They're like, "I'm not going to work that hard in a restaurant." [*Laughs*]

[00:50:12]

Eric Velasco: That also seems to be a big thing with immigrants in general, but especially with the Greeks.

[00:50:17]

Andrew Collins: Right.

[00:50:18]

Eric Velasco: You work hard. You as the immigrant works hard so your children can get a good education and do something else.

[00:50:24]

Andrew Collins: Yes.

[00:50:32]

Eric Velasco: Where are you going from here?

[00:50:33]

Andrew Collins: I don't know. That's kind of an uncharted path right now. I wouldn't mind doing a little traveling for a bit, and then I don't know. You never know what's in the future.

[00:50:43]

Eric Velasco: Where would you like to travel?

[00:50:44]

Andrew Collins: Well, I'd like to go to Greece again. I'd like to spend more time over there. Maybe see some of the places in the United States I've never been, because there's plenty of those, too, but I plan on doing some stuff.

[00:50:54]

Eric Velasco: You met your cousins back there. How big a family do you have back—

[00:50:58]

Andrew Collins: Oh, I have about six or seven first cousins still over there. So when I go, we're all together. They're all from the village and they all come to the village in the summer.

[00:51:10]

Eric Velasco: How big is Peleta?

[00:51:11]

Andrew Collins: It's not real big. The people that live there, they don't really live there. They all live in Athens or Piraeus or different big cities. Then the summertime they all come back for their little vacations and stuff.

[00:51:26]

Eric Velasco: To family homes?

[00:51:27]

Andrew Collins: The family homes, yeah.

[00:51:30]

Eric Velasco: What's the population like in the off-season?

[00:51:33]

Andrew Collins: Probably 150. There might be 1,000 at the most during the summer, and that would be—they have a wine festival in August, which is why I went, and there are like 1,000 people showed up for that.

[00:51:49]

Eric Velasco: Are there wineries or vineyards nearby?

[00:51:53]

Andrew Collins: Everybody pretty much makes their own wine. So it's pretty good.

[00:51:58]

Eric Velasco: Paint a picture for us of Peleta.

[00:52:03]

Andrew Collins: It's unpaved—well, the roads are starting to get paved now. They all have bathrooms, all electricity. All the houses have bathrooms now and they all have electricity.

They have two little tavernas in the middle of the village, right across the street from each other, so you either go to one or the other.

[00:52:24]

Eric Velasco: With food as well as drink?

[00:52:25]

Andrew Collins: With food as drink, yes, yes. They're small little narrow roads, and you don't have the white buildings with the blue roofs. Those are the islands. Most of these have the red-slate round roofs and brick. Usually it's rock building. Actually, about fifteen minutes from Peleta is Pigadi, which is where George Hontzas lives, that used to own John's Restaurant, so I saw him back this summer when I was there too. [Interviewer's note: George Hontzas is one of three immigrant brothers who ran Niki's Downtown starting in the 1950s. In 1972, one of those brothers, Phil Hontzas, bought John's Restaurant from John Proferis, the restaurant's founder and a fellow Greek. George helped run John's after Phil died in 1985, and was eventually joined by his sons, Tom and Pete Hontzas. The brothers sold the restaurant to non-Greek owners in 2004.]

[00:52:54]

Eric Velasco: Is that where the Hontzas family is from?

[00:52:55]

Andrew Collins: Yes, that's the Hontzas family. So it's all right there in that little section there.

[00:53:02]

Eric Velasco: That's another family tree I look forward to sorting out.

[00:53:03]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, that's going to be fun, yeah. You have a bunch of them.

[00:53:12]

Eric Velasco: I think pretty much that winds it up. Am I missing anything here?

[00:53:15]

Andrew Collins: I think that's pretty much it.

[00:53:17]

Eric Velasco: Well, we're going to take thirty seconds here, pause, and listen to the sound of the room. Thank you very much. We appreciate it.

[00:53:25]

Andrew Collins: You're welcome. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]