



Arun Sandhu

R&R's Curry Express and Punjabi Kitchen

Springdale, Arkansas

Location: R&R's Curry Express and Punjabi Kitchen

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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson

Transcriber: Diana Dombrowski

Length: Forty seven minutes

Project: South Asian Arkansas

[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:00:00]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Today is March 12, 2019. It is Tuesday. I'm in Springdale, Arkansas with
Mr. Arun—

[00:00:09:03]

Arun S.: Sandhu.

[00:00:09.15]

Annemarie A.: Sandhu.

[00:00:10.09]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:00:11.08]

Annemarie A.: At his restaurant, R&R's Curry Express. Will you go ahead and tell us a little
bit—well, first off, introduce yourself for the recorder, tell us your name, and what you
do.

[00:00:23.20]

Arun S.: Okay. My name is Mr. Arun Sandhu, and I'm an owner/chef of R&R's Curry Express,
a.k.a. Punjabi Kitchen. It's a North Indian cuisine. Been here for, like, almost about five
years. This is the fifth year. Yes. It's a typical, North Indian Punjabi cuisine. It's a

northern part of India; the food is a little bit different than other states just because, you know what I mean, you've got twenty-four states and so many languages. The food is different, as vice versa, but the spices are pretty much the same, but the way we cook is a little bit different. That's what it differs, the north from the south and middle.

[00:01:01.18]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, so, why Punjabi cuisine? Why pick that?

[00:01:07.11]

Arun S.: Why pick that? 'Cause I was from Punjab—you know, when I came about twenty-nine, thirty years ago to U.S. to study out in California, I was helping my uncle. He had a restaurant. I didn't know anything about cooking; I had no cooking background or anything. But my uncle was a chef, so he'd been working with a lot of companies. He even went to Middle East and cooked there, back in the days. So, when he came back in [19]80s, he came and opened up a restaurant. So, whenever he needed help and I didn't have nothing to do on the weekends, I used to hang out at the restaurant and then start helping him outside, dining hall, and then start helping in the kitchen. Used to have big catering orders, start preparing, prepping with him. So, I kind of liked it, you know? Then, of course, I was—as everybody is—a food fanatic, loved to eat. I loved to work in the kitchen, so it'd give me opportunity to eat different things and taste different things. So, that's how it started, about twenty-five years ago.

[00:02:07.03]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:02:07.23]

Arun S.: Then slowly but surely, worked my way up and figured out how they're doing everything, learned from him. Then start cooking. Now, I'm just creating my own—cooking for me, it's like art. I love to play with the spices. I create my own dishes and I have a lot of specials, and I keep on changing it. I'll go do social media, see what other people are doing, get an idea and mix and mine. A lot of fusion dishes. There's a lot of trend right now, like India-Chinese, Indian-Chinese dishes are really popular, especially in Indian community. People love it, just because when we go out and eat, all the families, they cook food at home; when they go out and eat, they want to eat Italian or Chinese, the most preferable. So, we have Indian pizzas, also. I'm working on a line of that, hopefully soon we're going to start doing some specials, Indian pizzas. Yeah.

[00:03:04.24]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:03:04.24]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:03:04.24]

Annemarie A.: What initially drew you to cooking? What was the thing you really liked about it?

[00:03:10.02]

Arun S.: Just the food, you know what I mean? I was really into food. You know what I mean. I really liked it, working back there, chopping vegetables and onions, cleaning up the meat, seeing what the process is. I used to sit down and eat all the time, but didn't know what it takes to get that dish together. So, I really just liked it. That's basically it, yeah.

[00:03:33.22]

Annemarie A.: That's great. How did you work with your uncle?

[00:03:35.00]

Arun S.: I worked for him for about ten years, yeah. Then I moved from Los Angeles to Seattle, then I went and met my cousins over there, started living with them. We started opening up restaurants there; they're also in the same business. I and my other cousins, we opened up, like, about six restaurants in Seattle. Out of six, I think three are still going. Three didn't make it. But I've been doing all this pretty much for the last twenty-five years, had a pretty good experience in this.

[00:04:04.23]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. So, what made you decide to kind of go out on your own?

[00:04:09.06]

Arun S.: Just because my family, I moved around towards here because one of my other uncles, he was working for Wal-Mart. I was in Seattle and things were getting a little tighter, so he said, "Hey, come visit me sometime. Bring the kids over." So, I brought the kids over, and they pretty much liked the area. I also liked the area. When we landed on X.N.A., it was a totally different feel. [Laughter] It was more like a . . . farming community and stuff. So, it was more like country. Nice country. It's not like that way. So, we came down here. We looked around, and it's nice and quiet. Way quieter than Seattle, hustling and bustling. Kids also liked it. Basically what it was, was one of my nephews went to the University of Arkansas before, so we got the opportunity to come and visit the campus. The girls really liked it. So, they said, "Dad, is it possible? You want to come down here?" And go to this university, than University of Washington, other options over there. Of course, it was expensive. Me, having a family, I had to look around to see where my budget takes me or whatever to get them the opportunities, what they need. So, that was the main reason, also, that we came down here. I, at the time, that point, I knew I was going to do a restaurant but I wasn't really sure. Then, I start exploring, somehow ended up in Springdale. [Laughter] Actually, I was looking for a location in Bentonville, but nothing was available. One location was available in Fayetteville, back in 2014. I went in there, talked to the landlord, he said, "Yeah, that's fine." Then I had somebody tell me to come here, look at this place, they have a . . . walk-in cooler back here, to buy that to put in that location. So, when I came and look at the location, I said, "Why there? What's wrong with here?" So, I did a little research. Tyson is across the street right here. They employ about five hundred people right there, they come to work every day, and there's, I think, thirty, forty percent of Indians there. So, that was my main concern, that hey, if

they come and work here or if I get lunch crowd, dinner, it's fine. Dinner, you can build your business for to-go's or deliveries, but lunch, you need some office buildings around you to get that business. That was the main catch here. I basically took my bet and chance on it, and it worked out pretty good. It took a little while, but—it took about three years. Three years I was struggling, not doing very great. But after three years . . . every restaurant is like that. Takes two or three years to build up your reputation and people know your food and stuff like that. And literally I didn't do no advertisement or stuff like that because I'm not a big franchise or a company that can have extra dollars for that. So, we're just word to mouth, kind of waiting on that to happen. Then, finally, it happened. We're doing pretty good right now.

[00:06:57.05]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:06:58.11]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:06:58.11]

Annemarie A.: Well, talk to me a little about, I guess, the challenges of starting up. Talk about that first process of starting your business here in Springdale.

[00:07:07.06]

Arun S.: It wasn't that bad. It was just . . . the investment part was there, of course, it wasn't that big of an investment, but still, I didn't have that much money, with my family helping. My uncle chipped in some money. My other sister was in India, she helped me. So, yeah, I gathered some money from them and then had a little bit of mine. Used some prayer cards, put it together. But only that's the reason I came down here, the opportunity is opening up restaurants like this is you always look for the set up already there. I have taken—what I was trying to do in Fayetteville was taking just an empty shop and turning it into a restaurant, that's a big deal. Getting the hoods and everything else in the kitchen, grease traps, sinks. They cost a lot of money. So, that saved me, to come down here. Vice versa. [Laughter] Landlord will always charge you a little bit more for places like this that's already established, that you can just come and open your business. So, yeah. But it still adds up, but not that bad. We didn't have to cough up the money right at the beginning, to begin with.

[00:08:07.17]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, talk a little bit about deciding who to hire. Did your family also help?

[00:08:15.19]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:08:15.19]

Annemarie A.: Your daughter works now.

[00:08:17.21]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:08:19.02]

Annemarie A.: So, did your family help kind of staff?

[00:08:20.17]

Arun S.: Yes. My nephews were here, two of them. They were . . . one was going to University of Arkansas, and one was going to NWACC [Northwest Arkansas Community College] over there. They were doing their graduation and they had time, so they came and also helped me in the beginning, to start. Then, yes, of course, definitely my daughters were helping from day one. Whenever they can. Now she is doing a little bit more than before because of her study schedule. Otherwise, you know . . . then, I have some people I hire part-time, I call the . . . what is this, tech, staffing people. Whenever if I have, on the weekends, parties of fifty, sixty, seventy people coming in, then I call them and they send me temporary help to come help. But cooking-wise, it's just me. My cousin was with me for a couple of years, though. In the beginning. But now it's just me, and I have three people in the kitchen. Also, they're part-time. Whenever I need them the most, I call them. The weekends and stuff. Weekdays, I'll just do it myself. I've worked, prepared food for so like many big parties, that cooking food for a big number of people, it doesn't bother me. I really love it. It's passion right now. I just wanted to come every day, get up, come into the kitchen and see what I need to do and get it done. Yeah.

[00:09:52.01]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about some of the things that you guys serve here? Describe some of your dishes for us?

[00:09:58.25]

Arun S.: Yes. Mainly, the part I'm coming from, came from, north part, mainly vegetarians. But there is meat. Meat is not that . . . how do I explain this. Like . . . well, when I grew up, now, things have changed big time. Back in the days, [19]80s, late [19]70s early [19]80s, it was all about vegetables, just because farming community. Grow up in a farming land, areas and stuff, villages. We used to grow our own vegetables and Mom used to grow vegetables in the vegetable garden and cook it all the time. Meat were like a once a week kind of deal. Maybe religiously, maybe what, I don't know, but that's how I grew up seeing it. So here, when I came down in the US and saw that you have to mix it up both. You can't really have—my uncle started up a vegetarian restaurant and he struggled a lot. But somehow, he's in Santa Monica, today's date. Santa Monica, Indian vegetarian restaurant. No meat whatsoever. He's doing great right now, just because nowadays, things has changed a lot. People are talking about vegan, plant-based. Lot of people get educated on not eating meat that much, substituting for the veggies and greens. Yeah. This is another thing, is in my menu, that we have a lot of flexibility. We have more vegetarian people come in here and tell me, "Hey, we go to restaurants, but we don't get that many choices." You guys have numerous choices. Then of course, my lentils, I can mix with meat, I can mix with seafood and everything else. So, yeah. Main thing is my

lentils and veggies. Veggies is a couple of dishes, not that many, but lentils is the main one. And then we do a lot of chicken. Our most popular dish here is chicken tikka masala, and that is, believe it or not, it is U.K.'s national dish, it's a Indian curry. But in U.K., everyone loves chicken tikka masala. And here, also, chicken tikka masala, the number one selling dish, and that's butter chicken. Just differ on the meat, chicken tikka masala is white meat, butter chicken is dark meat, but the sauce is pretty similar. The way we cook it is also similar. Cooked in a tandoori oven, we used to have one now, because you can't use charcoal anymore. It's all gas. So, we just use oven. So, we bake the chicken first. It's double-cooked, then we cook it in a curry.

[00:12:33.27]

Annemarie A.: That's great. You were kind of mentioning your mom and vegetables and you growing up. Did her cooking, or the cooking of your grandmother, aunts, did that influence anything that you cook now?

[00:12:43.03]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:12:45.02]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:12:46.05]

Arun S.: Yes, yes. It was the lentils is the one thing. I mean, when I grew up, it was all about getting proteins through your lentils. Beans and lentils are so many, like so many different kinds you can get it over there. They're just so unreal. You can't get tired eating one kind of lentils all the time. They have so many different green, red, blue, whatever, you know. Then they mix it up, too, it comes out really good. My mom recipe, I still use it. I knew it, but I got it from my sister. She helped me, you know how Mom used to cook the lentils, slow-cooking process. Here, over there, they used to cook in a clay pot and open fire. In here, now, we have slow-cookers, so that helps a lot. So, I put the recipe together, and it's so delicious. People come in here from all over. They say, one guy was here yesterday, he was from Delhi. Delhi is like the main capital of India. I'm like three hundred kilometers away from Delhi, north. He would say, "Man, last twenty years I've been all over the United States. Ate everywhere. But I haven't tasted a *dal* like this anywhere." Just smiled at him. I couldn't tell him, you know, what is it, because I just want to keep my secret to myself. So, yeah. That's surely my grandmother's, my mother's recipe, the lentils. That's my main also selling dish, especially for the vegan people and the vegetarian people. They come in here, *dal* is lentils, is vegan. They love it a lot, a lot.

[00:14:19.01]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:14:19.23]

Arun S.: I sell that a lot too, yeah.

[00:14:21.13]

Annemarie A.: Sounds good.

[00:14:21.14]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:14:22.22]

Annemarie A.: Well, walk me through a typical workday. What's a typical day for you like, if you have one?

[00:14:30.12]

Arun S.: Weekdays are a little relaxed, but weekends are a little bit busy. My typical day starts at nine o'clock in the morning. I get up, get ready, play with the kids for a little bit and then just come to work. Get here like about ten o'clock, 10:30 is when my day starts. And it goes pretty busy till now, two o'clock. Just chill. Now I have to start prepping for the evening, to do mostly my shopping. I do go out and grab my stuff. Sometimes my daughter, I send my daughter to get it. Sometimes I go. Go to Sam's Club, Wal-Mart, some vegetable stores where we can source fresh vegetables and stuff. Get that all, and then I have help, that they will prep with me, for me, for the evening. Then do the dinner, get done by nine o'clock on the weekdays. Weekend is ten o'clock. We're out by eleven and go home. That's basically what it is, twelve to thirteen hours every day, seven days a week.

[00:15:32.13]

Annemarie A.: That's a lot of work.

[00:15:33.09]

Arun S.: It is. I grew up in a farming community. My dad used to work really hard. He didn't like working on the farm, so he kind of went to school and got some education. He was a contractor. He used to build buildings and stuff. But I also didn't do much in the field, but have seen my uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews working really hard, it's in my genes, I think, or whatever. You know. [Laughter] If I don't work, I get depressed. Not just depressed, I don't feel good. Even though I'm sick, I'll still come and sit in the back and do something. If not just clean something, meat, or cut onions, do some prep work if I can't cook up front. But that's how it is. I just love it.

[00:16:22.26]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, I guess you're mentionin' how much you have a passion for this and you love it. Could you talk a little bit about developing a relationship through the five years you've been here with Springdale and the people who come, and kind of frequent your restaurant?

[00:16:39.28]

Arun S.: Yeah. When I came down here in the beginning, six or seven months, it was okay. Seven months, eight months into the business, I have people come in from the Chamber and they talked to me about it. And the city people, too. There's a couple of city council

members, the Chamber, they had a meeting in here. I was a member of their Chamber of Commerce. They was telling me how they're glad that I'm here, and it really boosts my thing, that, okay, people are appreciating me around here. Then a lot of customers come in and say, I had no idea what happened previously, but they said that a couple new restaurants came in and they went. They didn't stay much longer for business. There were just people praying for me, that I will make it and stay here. I told them, I said, "I'm not going anywhere." Because I have my own plans, I could tell them the whole nine yards, but I knew I would get my girls graduated from here. So, I had about, give and take, six to seven years for them to graduate. Then, if I establish my business, I like the area. I liked the area to begin with, you know. Since I came in, I have seen so many growth around here. In Northwest Arkansas— and then, in between, I have a chance to drive Uber. Believe it or not. That was one of my kind of hobbies, because I would get tired, here cooking all the time. Then I'll just go out and start driving for a little bit, for them at night. Hour, two hours on the weekend sometimes. And, I had a help at that time. My cousin and my nephews are here helping me, so I had some time. I was just trying to explore the area; how people were moving in here, how things were growing big-time here. It just fascinated me big-time. Yes. A lot of people here in Springdale appreciate me here, including the City and the Chamber. They always give us some kind of appreciation on their websites. Mention us here and there. So, yeah.

[00:18:42.27]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I think it's fascinating that you used Uber as a way to kind of get to know the area. What did driving for Uber teach you about this place?

[00:18:54.22]

Arun S.: To know how it's growing, so fast. How many people are, first of all, moving down here. I start watching the news and stuff like that. And when you drive people around, you ask them or they talk to you and say, "Hey, man, how's this area? I'm from New York, I'm from here, I'm from there." A lot of people I've met, especially I met a lot of people in construction, I met a construction manager that he was on the phone for like thirty minutes. I picked him up from airport, brought him down to Fayetteville. He was here for a meeting. He said, "Wait for me, I need to go back to Bentonville." I said, "Okay." So, with that conversation with him for thirty minutes up and down, he was telling that he cannot find people to finish up his project. It's so much busy here, so much development going on. Not just housing side, just the commercial side, too. So, basically, that gives me an idea that this much of growth is going on, this much building, then of course, businesses and everything else is following it around. A few years back, Wal-Mart make mandatory to all the suppliers to come in here, open the office. That was a turning point, is where I thought, "Hey, you know what? Need to open up a restaurant." Back in 2014. Actually, [20]15. So, that's how I learn a little bit more about Northwest Arkansas, and the areas. Which areas, how much and what, you know. Like Bentonville today is kind of like on a high end. If I wanted to go open up a restaurant in Bentonville, I would have needed like three times the investment I did here, and I was not in the position of doing that. That's the reason I stayed away, even though Bentonville is twenty minutes away from here, and there's lots of Indian community there, as you might have known. They come in here on the weekends and tell—today's day, they've been saying,

"Please open up another location in Bentonville." I told them, "Sorry," you know, "I have—you guys have to come down here. If you're too busy, I have so many delivery companies these days. You can utilize them and get the food right there at your home so you don't have to drive here, you're busy or whatever." But yeah, opening a restaurant over there was a big deal. Till today, too. I went, there was an A.W. Center open up right across from Wal-Mart, global center. I thought maybe I'll just go there, do a food court. I went there and talked to the real estate agent. The rent rate was so high, I couldn't even imagine. The thing is, I want to keep it competitive and reasonable for the people to come and spend money and eat the food. If I pay that much in rent, my dishes going to go up like five, six dollars more than what I'm selling now. I don't think that would be a good idea for my business or for people.

[00:21:35.08]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, definitely. You kind of mentioned the South Asian community, people from Bentonville coming down. Who kind of eats at your restaurant? Is there a pretty large North Indian or South Indian—?

[00:21:52.11]

Arun S.: North Indian community is not that big here. If it is, they are pretty scattered. For some reason, like I said, tendency is that North Indian people do not go out and eat in North Indian restaurants, because they believe that the womans and ladies can cook better than the restaurant. The only time they'll come to the restaurant if there's a big party and stuff like that, where they don't want the family to get involved in cooking. Then, or they will

take the food as a catering or to-go, and take it home, or they'll come in a big party and eat here. South Indians. South Indians are the one, they'll come in here and they're regular customers here on the weekends. Because their food is a little bit different than mine. My breads are the main seller to them, because they don't have that much of bread in their menu. They are mostly rice-based; everything rice this and rice that. So, they really come in and enjoy the breads, the *naan* breads and the *tandoori* breads that I make. There's another traditional Punjabi bread, it's called the *paratha*. So really, huge, big one, stuffed with potatoes. There's some stuffed with the meat, also. So, they really enjoy that.

[00:22:59.06]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:22:59.08]

Arun S.: Yeah. And we have a yogurt drink that's another main attraction for them. They don't have those yogurt drinks in their menu, as well, so they come and enjoy those yogurt drinks big-time. We have a plain one, we have salted, we have sweet, and then we have mango. The mango is the best seller, also. Mango *lassi*, it's called.

[00:23:21.00]

Annemarie A.: Those are good.

[00:23:21.00]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:23:22.04]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And too, I guess, you were mentioning getting your groceries from different places. Are there any Indian grocery stores or like local groceries that you use to kind of help get any of your vegetables or spices or meats or anything?

[00:23:39.13]

Arun S.: Yes. Meats, mainly is all Sam's Club, Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart less Sam's, more on the meat. On the veggies, yes. Veggies, we kind of to see what is available, where Wal-Mart is a main source. 10Box is a second one. There's a couple of Mexican grocery stores, they have a lot of vegetables that they use that's similar to ours. So, I go, just shop around, whatever's available there, and fresh. We just grab it from there. Spices buy it, yes. There's a couple—not a couple now—there's like three, four grocery stores, Indian grocery stores, in Bentonville. If I run out, I go grab a few things from them. But mainly, I order from Chicago. There's a huge warehouse over there. I know those people from long, long time. They are pretty much wholesaler, they sell it to these people and they retail to us. But I've somehow had a connection with one of the guys. I talk to him and I don't buy too much bulk, but somewhat, little bit in cases. I just buy it from them once a month and they just ship it. I receive my main spices from them.

[00:24:49.19]

Annemarie A.: Makes sense.

[00:24:49.19]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:24:50.12]

Annemarie A.: What kind of vegetables, I mean, are similar in between your Punjabi cuisine and kind of Latinx, Mexican stores?

[00:25:02.11]

Arun S.: Mexican is too close to Indian. Believe it or not. I was so amazed when I came into the restaurant business that Mexican spices and the bread, like tortilla, literally, I had Mexican friends, we sit down sometimes to talk, and they roll everything and eat like a tacos. We tore it, take a bite. But they cannot live without tortilla. They just do more corn and less white. We do white and wheat, less corn. Little bit of different. And the spices, pretty similar. Main spices they use is the main spices we use. And vegetables, of course. Tomatoes, onions, jalapenos, these are the main three things—and cilantro. They cannot cook anything without these four things. Our cooking also is not done without these four things. That's how it's very similar to Mexicans.

[00:25:54.04]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Did you—

[00:25:55.21]

Arun S.: They make salsas, we make sauces. [Laughter] But spices are pretty much same. They use salt, pepper, cumin, paprika, red chili. You just name it. Ninety percent of the spices that we have, Mexicans also have. One time, I ran out of one spice and I just went into this Mexican store back here and I was amazed. It was right there. I'm like, "Great." A small packet, but hey, it was there, available. Yeah.

[00:26:24.18]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:26:26.07]

Arun S.: Yeah.

[00:26:26.07]

Annemarie A.: Fascinating. Let me think. Could you talk a little bit, maybe, too, about I guess the Indian community. You've talked a lot about your family and the reason why you're here is your family and having kind of a foothold here because of that. But can you talk a little bit about maybe your involvement, if you have any involvement, in the Indian community here? Whether it's through a religious organization or like a culture organization, like cricket in America or something?

[00:26:54.05]

Arun S.: It is. Yes, it is. You said cricket?

[00:26:57.20]

Annemarie A.: Mm-hm.

[00:26:57.20]

Arun S.: Yes. Cricket is my go-to sport. I grew up playing cricket in India and watching cricket till today. Yes, there are some teams here in the summertime. When they play, there's a league going on in Bentonville, and yes, we get together. I go play there. And also serve food. Religious, yes. I'm technically a Sikh. Sikh is mostly from Punjab, but they're all over in India, all over places, but my religion is Sikh. There's a Sikh temple here that I go to. Every year, we have a function there, and then yes, I donate food, go serve food. In our culture, it is not just like donating food, it is making the food with the heart and soul and prayers, and go serve it to people, too. So, my family and us together and then other friends and family get together and we go. Every Sunday, they cook over there. Everybody takes their turn to take . . . we call it *seva*, but volunteer, that okay, we will get the food together and serve it this Sunday and that Sunday. Hindu temple is another thing. My friends were all Hindus, and I was Sikh, so I had from childhood, I loved going to the temple, also. I know a lot of people basically going to the temple first. Then, before I started going to my temple—sorry, the Sikh temple. The Hindu temple, the priest was very nice, and I know him from back in Tulsa. When he moved down here, he gave me opportunity, on every occasion, whatever they do. For me, what I grew up, the way I grew up was, it is a blessing from God if you get opportunity to go serve the people in God's temple. Make food, basically, and serve them. Back home, people don't get opportunity like that, because if you're rich, you know you have big contacts, then you'll

get the opportunity. Otherwise, you won't. Every other person cannot do that. One thing, of course, it will take money and resources. Secondly, even if you have money and resource, if you don't have contacts, you won't getting that opportunity. So, that was a great thing that happened with me, and I thought it—I'm thinking that it was a blessing for me that I knew the priest and every time they'll have an event, they'll call me. Now, I'm pretty much well-known over there. Every time they have a function, they'll call me, and whatever I can, I always keep on doing stuff for them. So, yeah. I'm pretty much involved in the religious temples over there, donating food whenever I can, yes.

[00:29:35.15]

Annemarie A.: That's really great.

[00:29:35.15]

Arun S.: Yeah.

[00:29:35.26]

Annemarie A.: You were mentioning the holiday that you were cooking for at your Sikh temple.

What is that called? Can you kind of describe that event for us?

[00:29:47.07]

Arun S.: Yeah, it's our first guru. We have ten gurus in our religion, and the first guru is Guru Nanak. His birthday comes . . . it's an Indian calendar. It fluctuate with the American, I mean the English calendar. The date is not very set, like it's somewhere in October,

somewhere November 1, November 1st, somewhere in that month, that month and a half. And it's a very big day for our religious people. That is, and the second one is April 13. It's called Vaisakhi. That also is tied up religiously and farmingly, that it is harvest season. So, back then, the days, harvest season was a big thing because everybody will get happy. They'll get dressed up, and they'll go and enjoy just because they got a good harvest or whatever and this and that. So, these are the two main events that I try to go and do whatever I can, if I get the opportunity. But the main one we go to is the first one, the Guru Nanak's birthday. It's in November. It happens here in Bentonville. The last year, I took a big cake. Now, we have a bakery here, Indian bakery. It's called Kquality. I don't know if you know it or not. Kquality . . . I don't know what the . . . Foods or something. They do eggless cake, basically. In our culture, there's no meat and no eggs, you know? So, they do eggless cake. I bought a huge cake, paid like two hundred dollars for a hundred people, and serve it that day. It was a great feeling, yeah.

[00:31:28.21]

Annemarie A.: Sounds like it.

[00:31:28.21]

Arun S.: Yeah.

[00:31:29.28]

Annemarie A.: That sounds great. Can you tell me, too—you mentioned that you cooked for cricket. Do you play in the leagues any?

[00:31:37.10]

Arun S.: Not anymore, but I did before, yes. Now getting too busy here; didn't have time to go.

But I still go and watch them and hang out with them.

[00:31:47.08]

Annemarie A.: And you said you cooked for them?

[00:31:48.18]

Arun S.: Yeah.

[00:31:49.27]

Annemarie A.: Are there any—well, talk about that, and then, are there any food traditions around cricket either where you grew up in the Punjab region or here in the United States? That's kind of, like, continued?

[00:32:02.11]

Arun S.: It's like after you play the game, everybody's hungry, they want to eat something, so basically everybody chips in. If there's an organization or a club or whatever, they'll chip in and collect the money, \$5, \$10 per person or whatever, and then one person will arrange, "Okay, what do you guys want to eat?" Basically, I have served them vegetable *biryani*. It's called vegetable *biryani*. It's a rice cooked with vegetables and spices. So, yeah. And with yogurt. It's healthy, too, and gives you your energy back after you get

tired of playing cricket all day. Yeah, I've cooked for them a couple times. But they like more—*biryani*s are basically a Southern dish, it's a totally Southern dish. In my culture, *biryani* is not there, but this is my fusion creation. I call it Punjabi *biryani* because it's more like a stir fry, it's not like the way they cook it. They call it *dum biryani* or *hyderabad biryani*. They cook it a little bit different style. I tried it a few times, but my rice get messed up. You know, get too much cooked and gets mushy. *Biryani*, that's not the right *biryani*. *Biryani*, the rice has to be all separate. With the meat or vegetable or whatever. So, yeah. It's a little technical cooking, but for some reason, I could not expert that. But I do a little bit differently, yeah. My *biryani*s are called Punjabi *biryani*s.

[Laughter] That's the reason, so I can differ them from that. But they like it. They say it's different, it's good. So, I took it a couple of times last year and they really like it. Matter of fact, the guy was here, one of the teams' captain, and said they're getting ready to start the league this year. He said he was talking, saying your name with the guy who was the manager that arranges food for the teams and stuff. So, yeah, he said that, "We might, if everything goes well, we're planning on to—the final, whoever wins, the team, we'll bring the team in here and feed them one day." "Sure, man, no problem, let me know. I'll hook you guys up." So, yes.

[00:34:05.13]

Annemarie A.: That's pretty cool.

[00:34:05.14]

Arun S.: Yes, yes.

[00:34:07.06]

Annemarie A.: Do you have any . . . I guess relationships, too, speaking of that if it's more community-wise, do you have other relationships with restaurant owners or grocers in the area?

[00:34:20.17]

Arun S.: Groceries, yes. Restaurant owner, yes. One restaurant owner I know, yeah. Couple of them, I know them. But just to see them here and there. I used to go participate in the other functions that happens in Bentonville, Indian functions, South Indian functions. They used to have booths that you go in and put up, booths and stuff. I used to do that a few years back when my nephew and my cousin was helping me. Now, they're not here with me, so . . . in the Hindu culture, they have Diwali, I don't know if you've heard about that. It's a lighting festival that's huge. And there's Independence Day, also. They celebrate that, huge. Well, last year, Independence Day, I went in the Links in Bentonville. People who live in the Links, they just had their own program. They put it together. It was really nice. I was amazed. It was really good. I took food there and served them, like a stall kind of thing. People come in and buy the food, whoever they want to, yeah.

[00:35:23.12]

Annemarie A.: That's really cool. And the Links is an apartment building?

[00:35:25.05]

Arun S.: Yeah. It's apartment building. I was really amazed. They had a little common area, and there was, like, a hundred and fifty people. I took food for, like, fifty people. I was just wiped right out in about thirty minutes, so I had to call back my cousin and say, "Hey, come on, cook some more and send me some more food." So, yeah. I said, "I said, I'll be prepared next time." They were telling me that. I was like, "In the Links?" But no. Links is pretty much, ninety-five percent of the people who live there are South Indians. I knew that before, especially the one Moberly Lane. That's where I went, actually. There's a few Linkses here and there. **Inbrookover**, when I was driving Uber, I went to the outside, and the Inbrookover is pretty full of the Indians, too. But Moberly Lane is totally—it was really a different feeling. Basically, it made me feel that I'm back home in India, you know? With all the program around, and that's what we do on Independence Day. The kids have their little singing and dancing, and the comedian will come and joke around. Then girls will come and sing song, and the guys will do some *bangala* dance or their South Indian, they have some dances, *kathakali* and a couple other things, yeah. It was really cool. For a three-plus hours program, it was pretty good.

[00:36:44.00]

Annemarie A.: That sounds great.

[00:36:44.01]

Arun S.: Yeah.

[00:36:45.23]

Annemarie A.: That sounds really great. Are there other things? I mean, you talk about those things, Independence Day and Diwali and Holi coming up.

[00:36:55.16]

Arun S.: Holi, yeah, I missed that one. Yes, Holi was pretty big too, yes.

[00:36:59.01]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, so all of those . . . holidays, is there any way that you try to incorporate that into your restaurant?

[00:37:08.04]

Arun S.: Yes, yes. Always look for opportunity, you know what I mean? Now, at particular time right now, just because my restaurant is getting so busy and, you know I mean, I'm trying to actually hire some more help. Just because, you know what I mean, to cater to all these people who come in here. It's putting a little pressure on me, my family. I have to go home, take some time off, stay with kids or whatever. Even though they're here, I have a couple other girls that are smaller than them. They come in here on the weekends, hang out with me, they see me working all the time. Say, "Dad, take a break, do this and do that." "No, okay." Just try to give them an idea that, hey, this is what Dad is doing. You should know, even though I'm not with you at home, what's going on here. Just make them come down here. I have a nine-year-old. She comes and helps, the other girls, to wrap the silverware and stuff like that. I'm trying to hire some more people to see if I can

participate more, but I missed a couple of participation this—like specially Diwali, I couldn't go there, just because my cousin moved back to New York. He came from New York to help me, and then something happened in his brother's family. So, he had to move back. Since he moved back, I don't have a main cook back there now. It's all me. I have helpers; they cannot do the whole nine yards, but I have to be here to do it. So, yeah. For that reason, I've stepped back a little bit this year. Hopefully, in the next few months, things will change, yes.

[00:38:36.11]

Annemarie A.: Definitely. I mean, I guess the question I have for you now is, what do you want to see long-term for R&R's Curry Express? Do you want to see this to continue on?

[00:38:51.06]

Arun S.: Yes.

[00:38:51.06]

Annemarie A.: What's your—you don't have to give me any of your, like, five-year business plans, but what do you want to see for this place?

[00:38:58.21]

Arun S.: Yeah. I'm hoping that my eldest girl will get into this business, and she, like I was telling her, the only thing is in our business, the cooking part. She don't—I mean, she likes to cook, but not in this commercial. Maybe it'll change or not, her idea, I don't

know. But for me, eventually, I can't do this all my life. So, maybe another four or five years? When these two girls will be graduated and they'll have the jobs and maybe things will change, and it'll be time for retirement. So, I'll just retire. [Laughter] So, I don't have no five-, ten-year plans, taking R&R Curry anywhere. Basically, just trying to do whatever I can now to save some money for my retirement and stuff like that. The more busier I'm getting, the better it is, because it will give me a chance to get out soon, too.

[00:39:54.06]

Annemarie A.: Definitely. I guess . . . let's see. Can't remember what the last thing I was going to ask is. Well, you know, is there anything else you want to add? I'm kind of at the end of my questions.

[00:40:10.29]

Arun S.: Nothing, just, you know what I mean, it's a really healthy cuisine. Lentils and vegetables, like I said, and meats are there. We try to do as lean as we can, our meats, nobody has no problem whatsoever. And people like it; we have some goat, is our main dish. Like here, everybody loves steak and Punjab, especially in India. I mean, steak is there, some part of India, people eat beef or whatever. But mainly in Hinduism and Sikhism, there's no beef. So, goat was the main thing. People here love goat a lot. It amazes me. First, I can resource it from anywhere local. Farms were here, but the meat was so expensive, I could not put up a dish for thirty, forty bucks. People won't eat it. There's no sense. So, finally, U.S. Food helped me out. They resourced me from—so, again, Australian and New Zealand lamb and goat is coming from Australia.

[00:41:15.00]

Annemarie A.: Wow.

[00:41:15.00]

Arun S.: Yeah. That amazed me, how, and Sam's Club, too. I can buy my lamb from Sam's Club and goat from U.S. Food, but they both come from New Zealand and Australia.

[00:41:25.03]

Annemarie A.: That's fascinating.

[00:41:25.18]

Arun S.: Yeah. And then people here . . . in Seattle, lamb was okay, but not goat that much. But here, goat and lamb, people love it. Especially Southern people here. They love it. And the spices. They surprised me on that, too. I have a fifth, like five stars, I have ten-star is Indian spicy. Technically we do it spicy but not that much, but I have some Thai friends. We always compete with each other, sometimes in cooking, they'll say, "Okay, I'm going to bring you a Thai hot dish." I love their pad Thai noodle or . . . pad Kee Mao. This guy will bring me a Thai hot that will blew my mind. You know, I'll be sweating eating. But the competition is, you have to eat it. If you ask for it, you have to eat it. Doesn't matter what's going to happen to you, but you eat it. Not like insanely, it'll kill you or anything, but of course you'll have some side effects or whatever. But I love chilis. I love to eat spicy. From day one, I'm like that. I didn't slow it down, or if I will or not. But if I go out

and eat somewhere, I'll have five, six green chilis in my pocket. The other day, I went to P.F. Chang. [Laughter] And I was eating and this waitress, she saw the chilis, said, "Excuse me." Said, "Where you got that from?" I said, "From my pocket." Said, "Oh, excuse me, but your sauces are not that hot. It doesn't give me that, what I want. So, I want to eat my green chilis with it." And I came up with the . . . I mix it up, seven chili peppers, and make my own sauce that I add up into where they ask for Indian spicy. People amazed me. I come on out here and see them. They're sweating and everything, but they'll eat every bite of it. You know? That's really fascinating. It's amazing, yeah.

[00:43:21.16]

Annemarie A.: That's great. I have another question going off that. You're talking about your Thai friends. You've come to the South pretty recently. What was your first experience or your first thought about Southern food, I guess in a traditional sense? And how has the food of Northwest Arkansas kind of impacted the way you cook, if it has?

[00:43:47.13]

Arun S.: Not really. I mean, like I said, Southern people here on this side of the country, I think, eat more spices than anywhere else. Okay? That's what I learn more about here. They amazed me, how they want to eat spicy. But some people, they don't come into my restaurant, they think Indian food. That was another fear that the people had in mind: Indian food is spicy. Of course, if you're going to go to a buffet, it's going to be one spice level for everything. Here, my status is a little bit different. I cook to the order. You come down here with your family or your kids. Like today, I had a family here, and they asked

for what they can have for the boy, little boy. I offered them a kebab roll. We call it in the wrap. They still say it was a little spicy. I asked them, "Have you ever eaten salt and pepper?" They started laughing. They said, "No." Said, "Well, then there it is." That might have made it spicy, otherwise, no. But I have a lot of other dishes, like lentils and chicken, that I can make it milder for the kids and stuff. But Southern people eat more spices than anywhere else that I have noticed. And that was another thing that I'm like, "Okay, I can explore it now." While the Thai, I didn't finish up on the Thai part. I ate there. I was fine. But they can only handle my heat. And I mix it up—matter of fact—Carolina reapers in there. You heard about them? They're from South, too.

[00:45:09.04]

Annemarie A.: Oh, yeah.

[00:45:08.24]

Arun S.: North Carolina reapers, chilis? They're the hottest chilis, I think. But people have debated on that and said there's some other ones, too. But I get them. From where? Bentonville Farmers Market. [Laughter] Farmers Market another thing in the summertime that resource, gets me a lot of good vegetables and chilis, especially. So, I mix all them together; ghost pepper, Carolina reapers, habanero, serrano, jalapeno. Then a couple others, whatever's available. I mix all that into one and then I make my own paste. Keep it there, add a little bit in it, whatever one wants, really spicy. And it really brings the flavor out, too. There's a guy in Fayetteville, they get together every month and they also try different restaurants. I don't know what this guy's passion is; he pays for the

food, but he'll invite everyone else to come eat with him, about ten to twelve people, whatever. Last time I took my butter chicken with them and they were really, really amazed. Especially that guy. He says, "Nobody has satisfied my palette, eating spicy, than you have." [Laughter] So, it really makes me feel good, because I made the creation on my own, hot sauce. And when I dish that into any of the dishes that they're more hot, it makes that really good. So, yeah. People love it.

[00:46:30.21]

Annemarie A.: It sounds like it. I mean, you probably don't have time to do this, but do you ever think of—or do you actually—grow your own peppers or any other vegetables?

[00:46:40.07]

Arun S.: Yes. My sister is helping me out with that. I'm trying to get her some seeds this year, hopefully this summer. She's going to grow some peppers in the back of our home. We have a little kitchen garden. She grows, if everything goes well, I get mint from her. I get small Thai peppers from her and then some tomatoes and some eggplant, too. Yeah, she loves gardening. She's also helped me out with a lot of stuff here in the kitchen.

[00:47:11.11]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, your sister lives here in Springdale?

[00:47:14.18]

Arun S.: Springdale, yes ma'am, yes.

[00:47:16.18]

Annemarie A.: That's cool, that's awesome. Well, is there anything else that you want to add? I mean, we've talked a lot.

[00:47:21.20]

Arun S.: I think yeah, we pretty much went through everything, yeah.

[00:47:25.10]

Annemarie A.: Well, thank you so much. I learned, I enjoyed learning about your restaurant.

[00:47:29.02]

Arun S.: You're welcome. No problem.

[End of interview]