



Sayed Ali

Aroma

Bentonville, Arkansas

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[Transcriber's Note: Sayed Ali is joined in this interview by his wife, Sughra Beghum and his son, Salman Ali.]

Annemarie Anderson: Today is April 10th, 2019, and I am here with Mr. Sayed Ali at Aroma, his restaurant.

Would you go ahead and introduce yourself? Tell us your name, your full name, and tell us what you do.

[0:00:17.7]

Sayed Ali: My full name is Ali Sayed Ashfaq Ali, and right now I'm doing a restaurant, as you see. It's basically Pakistani, Indian restaurant with some things included with, we hope, will be liked by Americans, like lamb chops and chicken tikka and samosa, but other things like biryani, they are not so popular among Americans.

[0:00:45.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

[0:00:47.4]

Sayed Ali: We started in 2005 or 2008.

[0:00:48.9]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay, so tell me a little bit about getting started. Why did you decide to move to Bentonville?

[0:00:56.5]

Sayed Ali: We came to USA for the second time in 2005, and we came to California. We stayed there for about two months, and then I had hard time finding a job, although I have MBA from California State University. I had difficulty finding a job because of age or maybe because of religion, I don't know, because of the way I look. I had a beard. And my daughter was here working in Transplace America. Right now she's working in Walmart. So she suggested that we move here closer to here. She was here. We were in California.

Then in August 2005, we decided to move here. I came here, tried to find a job. Had a beard and had difficulty for about maybe four or five days, then I shaved my beard off and found a job with Arkansas Support Network. There I worked three years. It was such a job that I had to stay with some client overnight and my day was free. Later on, they gave me so much time in the day also, but we decided to do some business.

So I started going to farms, getting goat meat and selling goat meat, because goat meat was not easily available in Arkansas. People came to me. Finally we had a farm in Avoca, 120-acre farm. I was **overseeing** most of it, but on that farm we grew goats. So people came to buy goat meat from us, and some will ask if we could make some biryani for them. Biryani is very popular among Indians. We started making biryani and then we said we can start the restaurant. Then we started the restaurant, and we started in—let's see—I believe August or September of 2008.

[0:02:58.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. So you just kind of stumbled into the food thing.

[0:03:02.4]

Sayed Ali: That's right.

[0:03:04.0]

Annemarie Anderson: So do you guys still have your farm?

[0:03:06.2]

Sayed Ali: No, no, we don't.

[0:03:07.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

Salman Ali: [Sayed's son] It was 2008. The gas prices and economy was kind of—so it was getting difficult to run that at that time.

[0:03:19.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense.

[0:03:20.4]

Salman Ali: Right. So we shut that down and started—

[0:03:23.2]

Annemarie Anderson: So did you guys butcher halal on your farm?

[0:03:26.4]

Sayed Ali: Yeah, yeah.

[0:03:28.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Cool! And so did you mostly do that or did you work with meatpacking plants?

[0:03:33.6]

Sayed Ali: People came to our farm and we did it ourself for them. I bought a meat-cutting machine, but then on large scale, we started dealing with farms. We would buy goats and deliver to the farm, and the farm would arrange our goats themselves and go out and butcher them ourselves, and cut the meat and hang it for a week or so, then we would go down there and collect the meat.

[0:04:01.2]

Salman Ali: It was a meat-processing plant.

[0:04:03.8]

Annemarie Anderson: What was the name of the meat-processing plant that you guys worked with?

[0:04:05.4]

Salman Ali: There are a few of them. There was Anderson's?

[0:04:12.6]

Sayed Ali: Yeah, two in Oklahoma, one over here very close by. I forgot the name of the town.

[0:04:17.1]

Salman Ali: It was a Henderson's in Anderson, Neosho, and then the other one was Four State meat plant in Big Cabin, Oklahoma.

[0:04:25.7]

Sayed Ali: Oklahoma, yeah.

[0:04:26.8]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay. That's interesting, because I talked to Ali Momani, who is the Community Butcher guy who now butchers a lot of goat and lamb, and it's all halal meat, and he was talking about how difficult it was to find halal, especially lamb and goat.

[0:04:46.0]

Sayed Ali: Yeah.

[0:04:47.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah, that's great. Well, talk to me a little bit about opening your restaurant. Like what was the challenges of opening this restaurant?

[0:04:57.2]

Sayed Ali: Finding workers. So we started doing it ourselves and I tried to simplify it, made recipes and sought help for people who were helping us, too, and we basically had everything under our own control because it's not a good idea to rely on people who don't know about our food. So we had basically all the recipes. My wife knows cooking. Along with her, I tried to simplify it, but she's not too much into developing recipes, so I did that for her, so that workers can be helpful in getting those things done.

[0:05:34.3]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. How did you find your employees?

[0:05:40.2]

Sayed Ali: At that time, it was not so difficult to find a lot of employees, but nowadays there's acute shortage. I had a file in it always about more than twenty applications, so people would come here and we would just hire them.

[0:05:55.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Gotcha! And could you talk a little bit about like what—how many—what was the, I guess, situation with South Asian food, whether it be Indian or Pakistani in Bentonville? Were there a lot of restaurants or—

[0:06:11.3]

Sayed Ali: There was one restaurant over there about maybe six miles away from here. I don't know what town that comes in, most probably Rogers. There was Rogers and this was the second one. In Bentonville, this was first one.

[0:06:23.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Okay.

[0:06:24.5]

Sayed Ali: And after that, the restaurant was so crowded, I used to go to my neighbor to borrow chairs.

[0:06:31.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Oh, wow!

[0:06:31.1]

Sayed Ali: We had forty chairs at that time. We have about maybe fifty, fifty-eight, something like that. At that time there were only forty chairs, and that's the chairs and tables that we got when you enter the restaurant. There was somebody else in the

restaurant, we bought his furniture from him and it was forty tables and chairs for them. So I used to go to my neighbor to borrow chairs and tables. It was crowded all the time. Then we started buffet. On buffet, it was much easier. We would just set up the buffet in the morning, and people would come and eat, and they won't have to wait. But without buffet, there was a lot of wait sometimes.

[0:07:11.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. And tell me a little bit about how Bentonville has changed, because now it seems like there's a large South Asian population—

[0:07:18.9]

Sayed Ali: Yeah, true.

[0:07:19.4]

Annemarie Anderson: —because of Walmart. How has it changed over time? Has it been easier for you to get ingredients or—

[0:07:28.0]

Sayed Ali: It's very difficult to survive right now. Most of the time you come here, you find the restaurant empty. That is because of buffet. Other people have buffet at lunchtime, and we were losing money on the buffet because Americans are very careful in eating, using the buffet. They take whatever they want to eat, but the other population, like Indians, Pakistani, and people from that area, they used to take a lot of food without

trying to judge how much they can eat, and they would leave a lot of food behind. Our trashcans were full. So, basically, and our buffet price was very reasonable, and we were adding continuously more and more rich items, like we had samosa on the buffet, we had tikka on the buffet, and we had [unclear], which is not very easy to make and its ingredients are expensive.

One day I saw somebody walking—we had Mango Shake also—somebody eating and drinking whatever they wanted, wasting whatever he wanted, and then he was walking off with two Mango Shakes. So that way we were losing the money. So we had to shut down the buffet, and people started going to other restaurants.

But, still, some of our items are such that they are very popular, our biryani and our tikka, so at lunchtime people who don't care about buffet, eating too much over there, they come here and enjoy their food.

[0:08:55.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Makes sense. Could you tell me a little bit about the food that you guys serve? You mentioned it, but I'm also interested in the recipes. Where did you get the recipes and kind of streamline those from?

[0:09:07.9]

Sayed Ali: I studied recipes at Internet, the Indian chefs who put their recipes on the Internet, plus I have some books, and then we are good judge ourselves also. We cook something. If it needs to be modified, you go to our shelves, they're full of spices, and we

have just about every spice available, and we keep trying and judging, and that way we develop and keep refining our recipes.

[0:09:36.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great!

[0:09:36.9]

Salman Ali: And Mother is an excellent cook too. She learned from—

[0:09:40.4]

Sughra Begum: [Ali's wife] My mother.

[0:09:41.9]

Salman Ali: —her mother. [Laughter]

[0:09:44.1]

Annemarie Anderson: Could you talk a little bit about that, your mom's cooking and what she cooked?

[0:09:48.1]

Sughra Begum: Yeah, my mom cooks very good, and my father don't let me to cook because I'm only one—I have five brother—only one daughter. My mother don't teach me, but I know how to cook, to put the masala like this thing. After that, I learn. I keep

my mind. When he start the restaurant, I cook. The people like my food. They enjoyed it. They said, “Very good, ma’am.” [Laughter] The food is excellent, they say.

[0:10:21.7]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Where did you grow up?

[0:10:23.1]

Sughra Begum: In Pakistan.

[0:10:26.6]

Annemarie Anderson: What sort of things did your mom cook when—

[0:10:29.1]

Sughra Begum: A lot of food after that, and my father don’t like me to go to the college because my country, people don’t study that time when I want. My father say—I applied to high school—he say, “That’s enough. No go to school.” After then, my brothers say, “If she don’t go to school, no married. Nobody like it.” [Laughter] My brother took me the other city with him, and I lived my brother. My brother was cook very good, too, and he and the servant who work at home. I don’t work at home. Go college and sit down.

[0:11:08.1]

Sayed Ali: Her brother was a professor in mathematics.

[0:11:10.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Who was?

[0:11:11.5]

Sayed Ali: Her brother was a professor of mathematics. She was principal of the college also.

[0:11:16.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Oh, wow!

[0:11:17.8]

Sayed Ali: And he was pretty rich man, and he— summers at home. There a lot of food, so she cook from there.

[0:11:27.8]

Salman Ali: They used to have a clay stove that used to burn wood and stuff, so that's why her father didn't used to have her around, because it was a wood stove. That's what I've heard. And then she went to college with her brother and stuff, and they had gas, so then she started learning on a gas stove.

[0:11:49.3]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great! What were your favorite things that your mom cooked or that you learned how to cook from either her or from your sister-in-laws?

[0:11:58.6]

Mrs. Ali: My mother cooked everything, fish, chicken, kofta, kebabs, shish kebab, like this thing.

[0:12:11.0]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great! That's great! So could you guys tell me a little bit about some of the relationships that you've developed with maybe some of your customers? Is there anybody who sticks out in your mind?

[0:12:26.5]

Salman Ali: Over the years, there'd be somebody that came around for a few years and then they would move, but, yeah, there are people that come and stuff, but then usually around here, a lot of people don't stick around based on projects, maybe, but yeah.

[0:12:48.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. Could you talk a little bit, too, about some of the relationships you might have with grocery stores or other restaurateurs in Bentonville?

[0:13:00.4]

Sayed Ali: The one store in Bentonville that buys samosa from us, they have food items. They carry our samosa also. On Wednesday he doesn't come because on Wednesday they

don't have fresh vegetable, so people try to avoid going there on Wednesdays, so if people don't come, our samosas don't sell, so he'll start buying on Wednesday. But normally he buys about two hundred samosas a week, so to do him a favor, we try to buy from him. Otherwise, there's a close-by store also in these stores, but most of our products come from Sam's Club. We rely on Sam's Club. We have membership there and their prices are good, products are good. Anything we don't get from there, then we get this from the Indian store.

And our meat comes from Harvest meat. They have goat and fish and everything. And then the goat [unclear], they sell us goat meat and halal chicken and also our supplies, like to-go containers and stuff like that. Otherwise, we buy from mainly Sam's Club, and the second choice is Walmart.

[0:14:23.4]

Annemarie Anderson: Makes sense. What's your favorite part about owning a restaurant?

[0:14:29.8]

Sayed Ali: Not having a boss. We make our own decisions and nobody dictates anything.

[0:14:36.4]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. Makes sense. Could you tell me a little bit, too, I'm interested in the South Asian community here in Bentonville, and also the mosque and the Muslim population here. Could you talk a little bit—I know I've caught

you a couple times going to pray. Could you talk about your mosque and the congregation there?

[0:15:03.0]

Sayed Ali: The mosque is normally full on Fridays. Just like Christians go to church on Sunday, Muslims go to the mosque on Friday, but other than that, there only are maybe sometime on average fifteen, sixteen people. Several years ago, five, six years ago, there were even fewer people in any prayer time, but right now there are quite a few more people than there used to be from India and Pakistan, from Muslim religion. So there are more people coming to the mosque.

[0:15:39.0]

Annemarie Anderson: That's neat. So it's growing.

[0:15:40.4]

Salman Ali: Before we moved here, there was an office building on J and 8th, and since we face a certain direction and it has to be in that direction, so it was going diagonally in that room, and I think on Fridays and during Ramadan and stuff, maybe six or seven people were there. That was 2005 time. Then it started growing into different houses, and now it's a pretty good-sized mosque now.

[0:16:17.1]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. Does Aroma ever do anything either during like Ramadan or Eid or other holidays, celebrations?

[0:16:27.8]

Sayed Ali: In Ramadan, we have big gatherings, we break our fast at sunset and people try to bring their food so that people can break their fast. They're fasting during the day there's no eating one and a half hour before sundown and then they start eating at sunset. So people bring food because they think it will make God happier if people break their fast with their food. So we have big get-togethers in the mosque, and then people order food from here, and most of them are from South India. South India a little bit different recipes, so their choice of ordering either from here, which is a common food between south and north, biryani is pretty popular, so if they order biryani, the first reference is Aroma. Then your snacks like samosa and tikka, they buy from here, so in Ramadan, I would say they are pretty **high**.

[0:17:31.2]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely.

[0:17:32.6]

Salman Ali: Discounts on big orders during Ramadan.

[0:17:36.7]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. Could you tell me a little bit about your typical workday? Could you walk me through what you do, what you guys do in a typical, you know, day here?

[0:17:51.1]

Sayed Ali: It has changed over years. Earlier it was much harder, but right now you see we came at 6 o'clock. The restaurant time is 5:00. She can take care of it. There are fewer customers. Earlier, we had a large number of customers and we had buffet also, so we had to be here, we had to be here as soon as the restaurant start, restaurant time starts in the morning maybe about an hour, hour and a half before the restaurant time. Right now today it's well under control. We have recipes developed. We have found out ways to preserve food so that we don't have to prepare food right then and there. The refrigerators and freezers are full of food, so right now it's not that difficult, but it used to be difficult.

[0:18:37.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Definitely. Sounds like it. Well, could you talk a little bit about some of the challenges that you face. Could you talk a little bit about some of the successes that you guys have had?

[0:18:52.2]

Sayed Ali: The restaurant always successful when we had buffet earlier, and then we started adding rich items we added [unclear], added Mango Shake and we added samosa, and then we started losing money because people would take a lot, let's take six samosas,

and the samosas would run out on the buffet and we would be waiting and they'd be frying and they would eat only two samosas and [unclear]. Obviously, we could not serve somebody else's food to somebody else. So then we started losing money, and that's when problems started.

[0:19:28.0]

Annemarie Anderson: Are your customers mostly from South Asia or do you have kind of like a mix of people who are from Bentonville?

[0:19:36.9]

Sayed Ali: About maybe 98 percent of the people in Bentonville that come from the subcontinent are from South India, so basically most of the customers, probably 90 percent of the customers are from South India, but, as I said, some of the items are very popular and we make fresh bread [unclear]. They make only naan. Not everybody likes naan. Naan is more popular than roti. Some people like roti. We have fresh roti coated with butter. Some people like that. And puri, we have a lot of recipes of puri, so they order from that also. Our puri, they say, is just like their home, their mom used to make. The chefs' cooking is a little bit different than women cooking at home, so if somebody likes his mother's recipe, then he likes our recipes.

[0:20:29.9]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great! Could you talk a little bit about—so you have naan. Do you have any other kinds of breads that you guys make?

[0:20:37.3]

Sayed Ali: We have puri also, but that—

[0:20:40.0]

Sughra Begum: Aloo Paratha.

[0:20:42.0]

Sayed Ali: Yeah, potato mixture in bread.

[0:20:47.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great! Could you talk a little bit, too, about—let's see.

What do you think that your restaurant provides for Bentonville? What do you think that you guys—

[0:21:11.2]

Sayed Ali: Homelike cooking, homelike cooking, homelike food. That's the main thing.

That's what we hear from people, and we have no reason to change it, because that's what we know and that's what our regular customers like, homelike cooking.

[0:21:28.8]

Salman Ali: Halal meat, too. I think we were the first people to have full halal everything. Not everybody did.

[0:21:39.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. And that's a huge service, it seems.

[0:21:44.8]

Sayed Ali: That's true, that's true. And me, being Muslim, we also do not eat food from a restaurant. When I go out from there, I have a hard time. Sometimes I'll simply change the gloves and serve us food, which has not touched any of the non-halal food. Still, we are clean. They are using a knife or a spoon. My wife says that's okay, but I try to avoid that. So people rely more on our food because we are of the same belief that they are. They may be eating non-halal food also, but they prefer this restaurant because of our halal food.

[0:22:27.5]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes a lot of sense.

[0:22:26.5]

Salman Ali: Like you got a cheese pizza, but then somebody cut it with a pepperoni before, so it's not really, with the juices—so, yeah.

[0:22:38.8]

Annemarie Anderson: Sounds like you're easing the minds of a lot of people by being able to provide that.

[0:22:42.6]

Sayed Ali: Yeah, true.

[0:22:44.6]

Annemarie Anderson: That's really great. Is there anything else that you want to talk about that we haven't talked about?

[0:22:51.8]

Sayed Ali: Salman? [speaks to wife]

[0:22:59.8]

Sughra Beghum: No. [Laughter] I don't know. I like it over there. That's it. It's good people, good place.

[0:23:10.7]

Annemarie Anderson: You like living in Bentonville?

[0:23:12.5]

Mrs. Ali: Yes.

[0:23:12.8]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. What's your favorite thing about Bentonville?

[0:23:17.0]

Salman Ali: Right now it's the trees.

[0:23:19.1]

Sughra Beghum: They have the flowers, like this time, season.

[0:23:28.2]

Salman Ali: She loves the season after the winter when all the trees are budding and the flowers.

[0:23:34.9]

Sughra Begum: And grow the vegetable outside my home. I love it.

[0:23:40.0]

Salman Ali: Time to plant some seeds, sunflowers and stuff.

[0:23:44.6]

Annemarie Anderson: That's nice.

[0:23:46.4]

Mrs. Ali: And my daughter come from Pakistan over here for to visit us. They have two children, they live two months at my home, and I go outside for the river, the good place.

[0:24:02.3]

Salman Ali: She'll put those seeds right now, and whenever her grandchildren come over the summer break from Pakistan, then they go out, they used to go outside and cut the tomatoes in the morning and the peppers.

[0:24:17.2]

Annemarie Anderson: That's so nice.

[0:24:17.4]

Sughra Beghum: Yeah.

[0:24:18.5]

Annemarie Anderson: Are you able to—what kind of things do you grow in your garden?

[0:24:22.5]

Sughra Beghum: Cucumber and green bean, long one, and lot of pepper, many kind of pepper.

[0:24:32.6]

Salman Ali: Different types of peppers and tomatoes.

[0:24:34.0]

Mrs. Ali: Eggplant.

[0:24:36.6]

Annemarie Anderson: Do you ever use any of your vegetables here?

[0:24:41.6]

Mrs. Ali: No, I use only sometime for the pepper. Almost I use in the home, I cook home.

[0:24:49.4]

Annemarie Anderson: That's great. That's great. Well, I do have one last question for you guys, and that's what do you hope to see for the future of your business?

[0:25:01.5]

Sayed Ali: We are both old— in our seventies. I will turn seventy in this coming June, and she's about the same age. So it's getting kind of hard for us to—I had heart surgery about two and a half years ago, about three years ago, and that has slowed us down. My slowing down was a heavy load on her, and as I said, work is much easier than it used to be, but she is under a lot of load, and that's not a good idea, so we may not continue this for a long time.

[0:25:35.0]

Annemarie Anderson: That makes sense. Well, I wish you luck in the future.

[0:25:38.4]

Sayed Ali: Thank you so much. Thank you.

[0:25:39.6]

Annemarie Anderson: And thank you so much for talking to me.

[0:25:40.6]

Sayed Ali: You're welcome, welcome.

[End of interview]