

**HAROLD SHINN**

**Buford Highway Farmers Market | Doraville, Georgia**

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**Interviewer: Kate Medley**

**Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs**

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**Project: Buford Highway - Georgia**

[00:00:09]

Kate Medley: But we'll start by saying this is Kate Medley interviewing Harold Shinn at the Buford Highway Farmers Market in Atlanta. Are we in Atlanta?

[00:00:20]

Harold Shinn: We're Metro Atlanta. We're actually in Doraville, Georgia, on April 3, 2010.

KM: And I will get you to take off from there and if you will just introduce yourself. Tell us who you are, what you do, where we are –?

[00:00:37]

HS: My name is Harold Shinn and my family owns and operates the Buford Highway Farmers Market. We're about a-100,000 square feet, plus or minus, retail. We specialize in perishables, produce, meat, and seafood, and also ethnic food products from various cultures around the world – Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European. And so and all the countries that you would associate with those areas – also the Caribbean and we keep adding. So we like the food diversity. Cultural food diversity has been a good business model for us.

[00:01:28]

KM: Okay; and tell us if you would how Buford Highway Farmers Market came to be.

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HS: Buford Highway Farmers Market came to be, we originally started off as strictly an Asian food store. And over time we saw opportunities to add other ethnic groups. The first ethnic group that was added was Hispanic, and in Atlanta that is predominantly Mexican, although that includes other Latin American countries.

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But this was sometime in the mid-nineties [1990s] when the economy was booming and we had a massive influx of immigrant labor. And it seemed a very opportune time to pursue a food product that would appeal to that customer base. And it went very well. And since that time, you know, there are many, many ethnic markets in Atlanta and in other parts of the country that specifically target the Hispanic shopper. I mean they're everywhere, you know, even including mainstream grocery stores and even more recently Super Wal-Mart. So yeah, it's [*Laughs*]—you know, it's ubiquitous everywhere, but, go ahead.

[00:03:01]

KM: Tell me a little bit about your family –

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HS: My family?

[00:03:06]

KM: — your parents, or if you want to go back generations.

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HS: Sure. My mother and father were, I guess, Korean immigrants to the United States. My father actually tried to work in France for a year and he was—after he got out of the ROK Army which is the Republic of Korea Army, he was trained in a field called chicken sexing, which if you're in the poultry business you know what that is and if you're not it sounds kind of weird. And what they did is when chicks are hatched there was no—there may be now, but at that time there was no really good mechanical, chemical way to determine the difference between a male and a female. And there was also—was no way to get all females which was you know desirable for the poultry industry and not have males. So you would actually have to

manually, right after they hatched pick them up, look at them in some way—I don't know if it's feathers or something you know—and then inspect them. And it actually—I think I was there, I remember as a little child looking at it and it actually seemed kind of a cruel process because you look at them. The females get sorted in a bin; the males go in the trashcan you know.

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And so I don't know if it's still done that way but it's hot, it's smelly, it's unpleasant labor, but it pays a lot and that's why he was doing that then. And he had—this was late sixties [1960s], late sixties, early seventies; he had saved a lot of money. And his end in mind was he wanted to have his own business of some type, so his goal was to make as much money as he could, save it up, because he had this idea, *I'm going to have my own business. I don't know what it is. But one day I'm going to have my own business, but to get there I have to save money,* so that is what he did at that time.

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So in 1974, he opened up what I am pretty sure was the first Asian food store in Atlanta. It was located on Piedmont—Piedmont and Lindbergh—which at the time was called Broadview Plaza. It is now I believe called Lindbergh Plaza and I think it was demolition(ed) and rebuilt a few years ago. And of course now there's a Marta Station and nice condos and everything in that area. But at the time it was one of the older malls in Atlanta. If anybody can remember living here back then it was the side of the original Southeastern Music Hall, which is where the Sex Pistols played for the first time and maybe the only time in Atlanta. So if, you know, for history's sake, but there was a small 1,400—1,500 foot, I think it was formerly a watch store and he opened up and he had like snacks and rice and certain canned goods and all these things were very difficult to get. You know he would get them from Chicago, New York,

and LA, which had more, let's say, robust Asian populations. And he brought it here and it had great appeal – granted there weren't many Asian people here at that time, but the few that were here did appreciate that. And it also had an appeal to just passersby. They thought it was exotic; they thought it was interesting. You know, I'll you know drop in here and try these snacks or whatever. And so it did very well.

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And over the years it grew to, you know they moved to adjoining space which was larger and then it went to 20,000 square feet. And then he got into wholesale and then he got into manufacturing things like eggroll wrappers and the type of, you know, the noodles you get in a lot of Chinese restaurants, the fried noodles that they bring out to snack on, and he was involved in soy bean sprout manufacturing and dabbled in a lot of things. But I think he kind of spread too much, too fast and I think it reached a point that was difficult for him to manage. And he made a big play back in the early eighties [1980s] to go mainstream, and he tried to do a—I guess what we now consider to be a Farmers Market concept to appeal to a mainstream audience. And it was located in town close to Memorial Drive and it launched. It had a big opening, fizzled, you know, did not do well—partly location, partly undercapitalized, partly lack of understanding of that type of business.

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And so I got involved after my freshman year at Emory and started working there and we started the business that we have now, which when it first started we strictly went back to what we knew which was Asian food, primarily wholesale and then we gradually re-incorporated retail because there was a demand for it especially in the Korean market.

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And then in the early nineteen—maybe '91, '92, we transitioned from—we were in a warehouse industrial area, about 20,000 square feet. We transitioned to about a 48,000 square foot former Lionel Play World Building off of Buford Highway and that was a huge jump for us because the gamble was that we would have a broader mainstream appeal. And we tried and it didn't happen. And there was just not enough product mix for us to interest a mainstream shopper.

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And you'll have to remember; this is—if this is early 1990s, the grocery stores, you know Super Wal-Mart did not exist. The dominant chains, I think Publix had just started you know in Atlanta, and so grocery stores were still developing kind of the fresh food, prepared food, emphasis on organics, you know all those types of things. These things were just starting.

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So you know we were still kind of stuck and we tried to make a jump to the mainstream. It didn't work so what happened is we felt—we decided that what's going on right now? Well there seems to be, good Lord, there seems to be so many Hispanic workers, shoppers, and so okay well let's try to sell food – let's try to sell food to them. We already had a lot of employees that were Hispanic. Let's see if we can make a go of this.

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And we started incorporating that; carrying food, seeking vendors, getting advice from people—from our employees, hiring more people, and it seemed to do well. And it continued to grow. And we had probably at least ten, twelve straight years—year after year growth primarily from that category.

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We had continued growth from the Asian category, you know, immigrants and people who moved to Atlanta from other cities, you know, for maybe a better standard of living. But primarily the growth came from the Hispanic food area. Let me take a break for a minute.

[00:10:22]

KM: Okay, I want to circle back to your parents.

[00:10:26]

HS: Uh-hm.

[00:10:28]

KM: Are both of your parents Korean?

[00:10:29]

HS: Yes, uh-hm. Let's see, they're sixty and sixty-nine right now and they were born shortly before the Korean War, so during the Korean War they would have been eight, nine, something like that. And so they grew up in post-War Korea. South Korea, which would have been heavily- influenced by US policy, so both in terms of education and even architecture, you know how the buildings were built. He mentioned to me when he was—he spent a year working in France—that even the architecture there it just seemed kind of strange to him. It was like, because you know they had things that are more, I don't know, renaissance , gothic, you know traditional European; the US at the time, this was you know late fifties [1950s], early sixties you know it was modernism, you know square buildings and that's what Seoul at the time was being built around. It was being modeled after a—more like an American city.

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So when he was in France it was like very different and of course there were no, you know, you had maybe five Korean people had in France and –but he was working there, doing the chicken sexing and saving money. And he gave that a go and after about a year he decided he didn't like it and he was going to try to immigrate to the United States now.

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So if he had actually liked it in France I would be French [*Laughs*] you know instead of American, so—.

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KM: And was your mother with him?

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HS: No, at the time he came and worked himself. I was actually born and then he left to work and then I didn't see him again probably until I was about two or three.

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KM: You were born here?

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HS: I was born in Korea, yeah. So technically I'm a first generation immigrant, probably in practical sense like a second generation.

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KM: Do you know how your parents met?

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HS: Yes, my parents met—they didn't tell me after a while. They were both working in the military and my father was a sergeant and I think he was something like an attaché to a



general or a high-ranking officer. And my mother worked at the switchboard on the base, so my father—because a lot of communication would go to high-ranking officers and he was the attaché so he was on the phone a lot and he would—you know back then to get switched to a call was like the old days. They'd have to pull a plug and then you know what you see in the movies and plug it into another thing, so he was talking to her on a daily basis. So he was wondering, who is this woman I'm talking to all the time; so that piqued his interest. And so they finally met and they liked you know and this is kind of the old nostalgia days—not like today where you know the people meet. It's the first person you date and you get married; you know that's today. That never happens –but yeah it was like that, so that's how they met.

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KM: And how did she feel about moving to the states?

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HS: You know, I never really asked her. I don't think she ever expressed any regret. I never heard her say any regrets or that she, you know, missed anything. My mother was the type of person that was always very devoted to my father and so you know pretty much whatever he was involved in in his life she would support him. And, you know, in that sense maybe it was very important for my father's type of personality to be with somebody like that because it can be very difficult. I realize having a family business can be very, very difficult and very stressful. And so you know if you don't feel as though you're both in it, it could probably create a lot of marital stress.

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But my mother has always fully supported him, so—.

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KM: The food traditions in your house growing up, were they of Korean tradition?

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HS: Yes, and it's—I guess what's interesting when I look back at it now and I think a lot of like things that I hear both from TV and even comedians and everything, anybody who has grown up in let's say a non-mainstream culture household or like a blended household or whatever it's you know at some point you realize hey what I'm eating at home is not what everybody else is—*[Laughs]* you know not what my neighbors and things are eating. And, at the time, it seems very normal because you're accustomed to it and it's very normal for your household. But then when you bring friends over to your house and everybody—ew what's that; what's that? You know, then you're kind of like, oh this is really different; it's like I don't want to eat this stuff anymore or you know I'm embarrassed to eat this stuff or you spend the night over at your friend's house and, wow, this is completely different.

[00:15:21]

KM: What were you eating?

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HS: Korean food because, you know, both my parents that's what they had and we—at the time, my grandmother lived with us and she was kind of like my nanny. And so she would cook what she knew how to cook which was predominantly Korean food.

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KM: Such as what?

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HS: Jjigaes which is basically like soups; you know soups, stews, meat, fish vegetables. It's basically like what you would consider to be—what most people would consider to be everyday home fare, you know, in this part of the country you just call it home cooking or you know what now you call Southern cooking. It's roughly its equivalent. You know so this is the stuff that average everyday people from Korea would eat at home most of the time.

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KM: And so as a child your father had this Asian supermarket.

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HS: Yes.

[00:16:21]

KM: In the Lindbergh area.

[00:16:23]

HS: Yes.

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KM: What was it called and did you grow up going there?

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HS: Yeah, I grew up going there. It was called Asian Trading and it had—I remember the sign at the time. It had kind of this—you know and the lettering. I don't know if you recall, you know like lettering you see sometimes on the Chinese take-out boxes which is kind of like just a vaguely Oriental type font, something and then it had a logo which looked somewhat Polynesian and—but I think what they were thinking at the time, and I don't know; I never asked about this. It was just something that kind of encompassed a Pan-Asian or an Asian feel you know and it

almost looked like Trader Vic's or you know something kind of all wrapped up together because it was at that time the idea was that it's Asian food because there wasn't enough of any single ethnic group to really say Korean or Chinese or Japanese or Vietnamese or Thai or any of these things. There just wasn't enough people.

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And so I think when you're without enough, let's say, mass of individuals who could identify with one particular group then you would tend to coalesce around whatever else you might have in common, you know, and that would be Asian food. And even though it's different, at that time there were so few people it still seemed to have a commonality. Now it's completely different because you have dedicated even, you know, whether it's Korean or Vietnamese or Thai or Chinese or any other ethnic group that you have more of a specialization that can cater to exactly the country that you came from.

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KM: If you will, tell us for the people that may never get to visit the Buford Highway Farmers Market, sort of take us on a tour.

[00:18:20]

HS: Take you on a tour, okay.

[00:18:21]

KM: What does it look like?

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HS: Well when you look at it from the front it just seems like another—not a strip mall but like you know a big rectangular parking lot like a building built, you know, 20 years ago, which it was. In fact this building was one of the first Home Depot locations before they started

building their own. I think at one time, even before that this building was actually a Treasure Island building which for retailers' trivia, in the 1970s, Treasure Island was a huge like probably 160,000 square feet and it included basically a department store and had a grocery store in the back. So it was one of—at least to my recollection, one of the very first attempts to mold a retail hard goods with grocery. And now that's a very common concept by Super Wal-Mart, but at that time it was you know well ahead of its time.

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That ultimately did not work out and so the building came under successive owners and then we secured the space about eight or nine years ago and we expanded a little bit to the adjacent, so we got about 100,000 square feet total.

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But when you walk in the first thing that hits you is produce and for produce now I think for the American consumer it's kind of a renaissance maybe and people are more aware of it not just for the health reasons but if they're aware of you know its importance as a good category, let's say a re-appreciation for it whether people are interested in organics or vegan or just interested in produce for just general health or just having more variety in their diet because it's — there maybe is some exotic variety that they're not familiar with that now they know via the Food Channel and blogs and YouTube and everything that they kind of know what to do with. Or, they may have eaten foods —let's say produce items that are from their favorite ethnic restaurant. And they say okay, well what is this. Okay, well how could I make this at home? How could I make this dish at home? And for us the importance of having produce up front —and I think a lot of grocery stores do this —is that, you know, it signifies the freshness. And for us it's probably the most important single category that we have because it's also the one category that

touches all ethnic groups. And regardless of what part of the world they're from, it's the one commonality that they always have whether they're primarily vegetarian or meat eaters or you know whatever religious group they come under. It's the one place that everybody shops is in the produce category.

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If you continue on through the store, in many ways it's kind of like a traditional grocery store, and the center store has more boxed goods, canned goods. But on the periphery you continue down and in a way you'd have to think about it because we're an independent store, one of the few remaining large independent grocery stores [*Laughs*], family owned, we don't really have a corporate format. I don't have a Board or a specialist who sits in corporate headquarters and says hey, how are we going to lay this thing out and do research and do sophisticated programs and—. You know we kind of just sit around and say hmm, let's put—you know, it's like two dudes rearranging furniture in a house. Sometimes you just kind of experiment.

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And so it's kind of a *mélange* of stuff. And it changes, but for right now we have—other than the perishables and then we have a large meat section, which is probably different than a lot of other stores. It includes a lot of offal type products, and by offal, meaning things that are like organ meats and also pieces of the animal that in many other cultures are considered daily fare—like oxtail you know, tongue, you know, you name it, cow feet.

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Now for the people who are just used to eating the slabs of meat like you know t-bone and things like that, those are things—wow; you know I'd never eat those. [*Laughs*] But I think what a lot of people fail to understand is, like the interest in the whole part of the animal has

always been there because in a long time ago you didn't have a choice. You know you didn't have refrigeration and at best you had salting, you know, and other methods of preservation. And also you may have not been of a socioeconomic class to be able to afford the premium cuts of meat. You got what was left over. And so you made do with what was available. But you know a lot of culinary traditions even from cultures that the food traditions that you know started from either poor cultures or even slave cultures, come up with great-tasting food. You know they figured out how to make the stuff taste fantastic.

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And, I think what a lot of the people don't realize now is that even if they go back to their own families and you go back far enough in the traditions people are eating the stuff and it wasn't considered, you know, bad or awful. It was just another part of the animal. And now you have more of an enlightened sense, where head-to-tail eating and things like that where you're actually, you know, appreciating everything. But we have a lot of the offal product. *[Laughs]* And we have a lot of seafood product; our seafood product primarily is still focused on the ethnic category. We still have a lot of mainstream items, filet items, and of course shrimp and you know live fish, live crabs, crawfish, when we can get them, eel, you know things like that. But throughout the store, as you walk through and of course I walk through every day so I'm kind of immune to it but you'll hit pockets of—you feel like all of the sudden wow, I'm in a very ethnic part—parts of it feel very mainstream and then parts—wow. All of the sudden I'm kind of in another country or I'm kind of in an alternate universe, like the parallel of the packaging looks familiar but all the words are different and the smell is kind of, not bad, but different you know.

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And that's just part of us strategically placing food categories throughout the store. And so our store is laid out primarily by nationality or let's say by origin of country, so let's say you were looking for, hey, I've got this product and I think it's Jamaican okay. You would head toward the Caribbean Jamaican category instead of let's say it was a spice, but I think it's a Jamaican spice. You would head toward the Jamaican Caribbean category and not to the spice category.

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We had a long deliberation about how to do this. And whether to do it via nationality or to do it by category, and what we concluded was that we had too many nationalities to make the category workable. Now this has good points and bad points. The good points are that when you want to find something, if you know what part of the world it came from you can probably find it. The bad part is if you want to see all the spices in one place, like I would like to see all the Caribbean spices, the American spices, the Asian spices all in one place, you can't do it, you know. You got to go to the other one. So there's a trade-off involved. And I've seen other stores do it in different ways but for us this works best. And actually I believe it gives the customer the experience from the way that we want to present it—is I want you to in a way experience the culture. And if you experience all the food product together as opposed to by category then to me that would make more sense and it would make more sense from a physical world, because when you go visit some place you are immersed in that culture, you know, so if you go to France then you see the French streets, the French buildings, the French food, the French people, the French language you know and so it's, you know, to me it kind of melds well. And for most people once they come—once you figure that out and the light bulb goes off you say oh okay, the little store



is this way, then you can find stuff. But for a lot of people it is confusing because it's different than the way other things are formatted.

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But so throughout the store, other than the perishables, you have pockets and areas that are specialized in the ethnic categories. All the Asian food is kind of together although then separated you know Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Indian. I have the Hispanic food category whether it's Mexican, Central South American, you know Colombian, Brazilian; we have what we call just the standard American food category which really is not designed to appeal to American shoppers. It's actually designed to appeal to the ethnic shopper that wants to complete their shopping experience and let's say if they get their stuff but they want to get diapers and baby food and things like that. And then we have the Eastern European food category which includes most of the—in Eastern Europe most of the former satellite countries of the Soviet Union. And they share commonalities. They're distinctly different. It's just the same analogous as when you talk about Latin America. I'm sure most of them speak Spanish and most of them have cultural similarities but they're distinctly different you know. So it's the same way with a lot of the countries in the former Soviet bloc. Many of them do speak Russian. Many of them have the same base ingredients. You see a lot of the similarities, but there are differences, and so it's kind of analogous to when I was mentioning earlier when my father had the first Asian food store and there just weren't enough people to really say there was a distinct category. And it's not that there's not enough people of Eastern European origin; there actually are, you know a lot more let's say in the Northeast maybe than here. It's just that for a long time as a community I think that they feel some, whether you call it association or with each other or

familiarity because they're from that part of the world. And that's more salient when you are an immigrant to the United States.

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Now if you were in that part of the world, then yeah, I'm from Poland and you're from wherever. We're from two different countries, but you know when you both travel from your respective countries and go to another country, oh yeah. Well I'm from that part of the world. We have something in common, something like that. But yeah there are a lot of similarities and familiarities with food and with food product, and I think especially what I've learned now is a lot of the brands since geographically that part of the world is close. A lot of trading takes place between the countries, and so a product that may be produced in one country is familiar to consumers of an adjacent country. And so in that sense then they become kind of acclimated to consuming brands that didn't come from their country but came from an adjacent country.

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But I think the demarcation there is predominantly between East and West. It's still—some people would say it's all European. I would disagree. I think the food traditions are—now they're very similar. There's a lot of similarities but it's still different, and I don't know whether it was something from the Cold War or even something pre-Soviet between East and West Europe. There is just something there that's just a little bit different. It may go even to when the church split between Orthodox and I guess what became Catholicism, maybe even that far, but it's just, it's hard for me. I'm still learning; I'm trying to figure it out but there's just something qualitatively different.

[00:30:53]

KM: And your store is located on Buford Highway?

[00:30:59]

HS: Yes, and we're located on Buford Highway so—

[00:31:03]

KM: So tell someone who may have never been to Atlanta—

[00:31:06]

HS: Yeah.

[00:31:08]

KM: —what that means and how your store fits in.

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HS: Buford Highway is a Georgia highway that stretches all the way from what is now Sydney Marcus which would be the intersection of Sydney Marcus and Lenox Road. It goes all the way up to I believe Lake Lanier, up to Buford, Georgia, so you know it's a really long stretch of highway. But effectively the part of Buford Highway that I think is unique probably starts at around North Druid Hills Road and extends probably until you get to maybe Highway 120 or Duluth.

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What's characteristic about Buford Highway, particularly the area in and around Doraville, Chamblee, and Norcross – and we are in Doraville – first geographically, we are at the intersection of I-285 and Buford Highway and in close proximity to I-85 and Peachtree Industrial, which means this particular area has heavy, heavy traffic, both transportation, both for warehousing, service manufacturing, everything. And it has that type of busyness, you know, that dynamic – people just doing business. But also it's – for a long, long time, probably extending back maybe 25-30 years ago – it became more ethnic. You know, it became more

Asian, it became more Hispanic, and it became more all other types of ethnic groups. And I would say the difference between areas in and around Buford Highway and let's say other older cities, you know Chicago, New York, maybe even LA, there's the distinct—this is the Korea Town. This is Chinatown. This is the Polish area. This is East LA. And you really don't have that here. You have areas of concentration of businesses but you kind of—it's almost like somebody took a handful of your ethnic groups and just did a little shake and just [*Laughs*] threw it down and scattered it all over the place.

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And so in that sense it's distinct from some other areas that you may experience. But the experience of actually traveling down Buford Highway especially relative to maybe other parts of Georgia is you see a lot of signage that is in other languages. You see a whole variety of businesses and stores, which are, because they may focus on appeal to other ethnic groups that you don't see anywhere else. You see a lot of what I would call the small capitalization or, you know mom and pop type businesses, particularly started by immigrant families, so you know these are businesses whether they're reselling something, importing something, cooking something, you know you name it, it's there.

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And now in my particular experience, it's my opinion, that there's a very strong entrepreneurial value in many immigrant communities because that is how they feel they can actually get ahead in this country. And that's how you see it reflected, and that's a lot of the things that I feel that you see on Buford Highway. You have also some of the old, some of the new, and it's all mixed together and it's a very unique experience and it's been that way for a while. And so for us being located on Buford Highway and being close to I-85 and Buford

Highway it's kind of ideal because the food culture that we represent is also reflected in the people who live, work, own businesses in this area. So yeah for us it's a great fit; it's a great fit.

[00:35:32]

KM: Tell us about your customer base.

[00:35:46]

HS: Uh-hm.

[00:35:48]

KM: Who is it and—and what are they buying?

[00:35:50]

HS: The customer base is first obviously the ethnic customer who eats the ethnic food that we sell. So whatever food product, let's say we sell Korean food and we have some Korean customers. We sell some food from different parts of Mexico, Central South America, the customers from there, from Eastern Europe—food, the customers are from Eastern Europe. But for us we look at it this way. You can look at the store and you say okay, we have ethnic food products. I carry this food and it goes to this or that customer. Alright, you can look at it that way.

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For us it's, I carry this food and certainly it appeals to that customer. But actually it's for everybody who wants to eat that food, because you can. You can eat that food. It's just, you may not be familiar with it. It may be somewhat mysterious for you and in the plus sense it may be exotic for you and appealing. What I feel is that over the past several years due to understanding, due to popularity of food media, writing, food writing, also there is more cultural familiarity between cultures or individuals who are descended from cultures. There are more mixed

marriages. There are more households that have, you know, my brother's wife is from Brazil or you know something to that—and so you get acclimated to it from that way. My co-worker is from India. You know, I went to my roommate's sister's wedding and it had all this food that I've never tried before. So it's a lot more exposure, plus what we're willing to eat when we go out and not just for formal sit-down and eat – if you look at the reflection of what's available in the food courts in a lot of the parts of this country. So you have this increased awareness, appreciation, acceptance, tolerance for foods that may not be foods that you grew up with and in that sense it fits us very well because that's what we have and that's what we have worked toward and that's what we represent.

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So and I think that's actually what people like because you know –there are the food categories that we have, there are a lot of ethnic food stores that really specialize in that category that do a more thorough job for a singular category—let's say, call it Japanese food or Korean food or Mexican food where you would have one continuous ethnic experience. Like you go in and all the employees are from that country. All the food is from that country. Everything is from that country. And that has an appeal and a place you know in the marketplace and I think they can be very successful. We don't have that model; we have it from a lot of places. And in a way it's difficult [*Laughs*] to do because I have to deal with different languages. Some things even though we try to educate ourselves on many different things you don't really, really fully understand until you actually eat a lot of it. You know it's like you don't really know and understand a country; you got to be there and spend some time there or to understand the language you have to really talk to people and you really want to understand the food. You can read about it, you can smell it but hey ultimately, you just have to eat it and you have to eat a lot

of it to understand the variances and the nuances and, you know, what some people may cook in this household may not be exactly the same thing they cook in another household even though they're from the same country. Even they might be from the same region of the same country and Lord knows two different regions of the same country; ask a person in North Carolina what barbecue is and ask a person in Texas what barbecue is and it will be two completely different realities.

[00:39:52]

So and that just comes with the time. We feel as though we've really come into the type of business that we've evolved into being is really coming into its own for—at the point at which the country is at, the city is at, this part of the South is at, and I think when you look at it, it's a very, very interesting time, really interesting time. And it's also a great way; food is a great way that you can experience another culture. It's not very risky. Most things you won't die [*Laughs*], you know, from eating it and it's an experience, like the food has always been. It can be a singular experience, it can be a social experience and it can be something you can share and talk about and enjoy.

[00:40:50]

KM: The ethnic communities in Atlanta have shifted during the lifetime of the Buford Highway Farmers Market. How do you see that reflected when you walk around your store or when you look at your sales numbers; how does that affect your business and what have you observed?

[00:41:10]

HS: For the type of business that we are, I think, what we observed is that you have, let's say, a new ethnic category or a new ethnic group and what happens is the numbers are first small

and then there's not a lot of food support, let's say the brands or the items that they're familiar with either because they have to be imported, like nobody makes it here. So somebody has to import it. The importer is not going to import it if he can't do it enough to make money. I'm not going to Fed-Ex one box from Brazil [*Laughs*], you know, and expect to make a living off of that.

[00:41:58]

So usually it falls under specialty importers or people who can locate things from different countries and try to locate and get enough product here for that customer-base. Now, over time, if that population increases in size it becomes more profitable for these people—for the people down in the distribution chain. Like wow, you know, I can start bringing containers. I can't start sending it to distributors. You know and I can start making the money doing this as an importer. For us, we do some direct importing, but we're also further down the chain. I have a single store. I have to have a good mix and selection of items that appeal to that category of consumer. And sometimes we try to lead in terms of identifying and try to lead and try to source those products. And if those populations increase over time – and I think it will happen with all of them it—it gets adopted by everybody – everybody who wants to make money in the food business and increase the category, as long as the numbers are there they will start to. I mean ultimately if the numbers are there Wal-Mart will carry it. [*Laughs*] You know, that's the—ultimately, yeah.

[00:43:11]

KM: So in the last twenty-five years, say, what has changed? What has really blown up and what has really diminished?



[00:43:17]

HS: [*Sighs*] Ugh, I'd say, in the last twenty years hands-down the largest growth, and in my opinion the biggest impact would be the Hispanic shopper, absolutely hands-down. I think from a consumer profile, they actually—this is what I've read. In terms of a shopper, like somebody who buys groceries they would have a slightly larger household than average. They do more cooking at home on average. And they have more individuals at home that would cook like traditionally. So in a way, that's an ideal grocery shopper. And that's also demographically - that's probably had the biggest impact on this country in all parts of the country. And like I said, right now, marketing toward that category, I mean it's ubiquitous, it's everywhere. Like I said, once Wal-Mart starts carrying it [*Laughs*] that's when you know –it's a permanent part of the culture.

[00:44:33]

The Asian has always been there –and the numbers have increased and actually the Eastern European, it's actually always kind of been there. I mean, the difference between Eastern European and other categories is –it's almost like it's a hidden minority because the immigrants, because they're white, they're Caucasian, that it's not really noticeable when you, you know, if it's out in public you don't really have a sense just in casual looking and especially for a lot of their children once they learn to speak English, they're very acculturated on a superficial level. You know mentally, I don't know. That depends on your background. And you know your food tastes, I don't know. You know it depends on how acculturated you are. So in that sense it's not as easy to see you know if a million people of Asian or Hispanic descent popped out in Atlanta you'd kind of see it, but from some other parts of the country it's a little bit more difficult to tell visually the impact, but it's there. And it has an influence.

[00:45:43]

But by far, it's like if you were telling me what had the biggest impact over the last twenty years—Hispanic, and that includes all the Latin American countries. And, in this town, predominantly Mexican and there are many, many other ethnic groups represented and you know certain in other parts of the country there may be, you know, Miami would have been the past 30-40 would have been Cuban you know and maybe differences in other parts of the country as well. But as far as any particular group I think it – sometimes it ebbs and flows with the economy. I just overall it just seems more to me, more of everything, and I think that's partly reflected in our immigration policy, you know, whether you look at it as a—that it still needs fixing, you know whether you think it's too permissive or maybe too restrictive or just altogether messed up. That has contributed to a great deal on the cultural makeup and definitely on what people buy for food, absolutely.

[00:46:55]

But if there was one thing to me that is the most interesting it is again not what places the people come from. It's that once they get here, what's in their head and what they think about food. So ultimately you have somebody who may have come from China and who grows up here and who eats Indian food twice a week and the other half of the week he likes Mexican food. And he takes an interest in other things. And so that to me is the most interesting thing; it's the food consumer is much more open-minded to what they're willing to consume and willing to try. And if you think about that in the sense of all the different—I mean the food industry in this country already manufactures like tremendous, you know, let's come up with a new sauce, product, soup, something all the time, you know to get us to buy more stuff. I mean some part of it is self-serving and some parts, maybe they will come up with some really great soup or

something that we just haven't tried yet. But there's also that other variety that comes over from other food cultures that maybe become adopted as well.

[00:48:21]

So it's that part that's really the most interesting thing and I think in a really far-reaching way is going to have the most impact. It's not that you have a particular group of people land in a particular geographic part of the country. Yes, that does have influence but the bigger overall influence is once that happens how they view themselves both as Americans and as being part of a—having traditions of a former culture, a previous culture, how other Americans view these different cultures and how they view them in terms of now having these delightful food experiences that you can try. That is the really big thing to me.

[00:49:10]

KM: You grew up in the South?

[00:49:15]

HS: Uh-huh.

[00:49:17]

KM: How do you think the increase of ethnic food in the South is influencing the Southern food traditions and culture?

[00:49:28]

HS: Okay, um, I don't—if that question is in terms of like – if you're talking in terms of fusion, a little bit, you know maybe like food gets spicier. You know there are certain things that you would eat as an accompaniment with your food that maybe fifty years ago did not exist. There are things that people would eat at let's say picnics and get-togethers that would—because it didn't exist many, many years ago or people weren't familiar with it, now it's just become an

accepted part of it. So if you go to a family reunion, church picnic, etcetera and you have fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, cornbread, collard greens, green beans, potato salad, deviled eggs you know and depending on your family background, X, Y, Z, plus, plus, plus, you know, all the familiar things that if you grew up down here and had friends whose families had at least you know maybe twenty, thirty years or a couple generations, a lot of those things are just things you always expect you know. It's like where's the macaroni and cheese? You know who forgot the, you know? *[Laughs]* No fried chicken? You know it doesn't mean everybody has it all the time but it's common stuff that shows up all the time.

[00:51:05]

But I think that's still distinct, so in terms of fusion, well not so much, because I think that what's interesting to me is what—like if there's been a food recipe dish that's existed for a long enough time, people monkey with it and you know because the cooking magazines have to come up with something, so they put their own spin on whatever. But when you actually go to somebody's house or, like I said, the reunion or for a Sunday dinner and you get the basic, the good stuff, it remains relatively unchanged.

[00:51:40]

And I think that is because it resonates with a lot of people and this is—hey this is a successful combination. It works. You can add stuff to it but hey, the basic stuff is still—it's still very good. And so the food that comes in from the other cultures, to me the ones that are the most predominant are the ones that they are eating—they grew up eating and the ones that they, too, would eat, like they'd go to a family picnic and you for Koreans it might be kimbap and you know other things, and for other, you know, it might be tamales and what have you. So I think to the extent that people or younger people or people who are more adventurous in food, because

they also have these social connections and they have the opportunities to experience the food not just at a restaurant, okay which is one part of it, but as a part of a social connection, so you know if I invite you to a family picnic or a family reunion that I'm having and you come from a, maybe a different food culture then you are experiencing the food culture from really the base level from what the people from that culture really consider –what do you call it—comfort food or you know food they grew up with. You get that a little bit from a restaurant but you're never really sure what it is from a restaurant because that may be that restaurant owner's interpretation of what the food should be and he wants to have it to be a marketable appeal, etcetera and have his own unique spin on it so you'll eat at my restaurant and not John's restaurant that has the same type of food and from the same country. But I think as the social connections increase that the familiarity with the food and the exposure to the food at that level, you know at the social level increases and then it will become more acceptable.

[00:53:35]

You know on the SFA [*Southern Foodways Alliance*] website –and I had heard this story before somewhere on the food—but they went over hot tamales and why hot tamales were even in that part of that country and where that came from and you know that was where you had field workers, who basically were working in close proximity to each other and then said hey, what you got there? Hey, that's good, you know. And then over time then it will be, you know, incorporated into the local culture. And I think, given enough time, that will be the case. And I don't think it's the case where Southern food also—I mean it has a great tradition and it—just regardless of any—and of course when I'm talking about the food here I'm not talking about health issues. That's a whole other story. I mean I just had a recent physical. I'm not going to tell you what my cholesterol level is and everything but you know this stuff, man it, when it's done

right, when any type of culture food when it was done right by people who eat it every day, it's fantastic. It really is. You know and it should be—to me it really should be appreciated on that level.

[00:54:51]

KM: I want to pause for a minute and—I want to talk about you.

[00:55:03]

HS: Yeah.

[00:55:03]

KM: I want you to introduce yourself.

[00:55:08]

HS: Okay.

[00:55:12]

KM: And I'll link here to what I was going to ask you in the beginning. I want you to first off tell us your birth date.

[00:55:21]

HS: Okay.

[00:55:21]

KM: And from there tell us who you are.

[00:55:22]

HS: Okay, my name is Harold Shinn. I'm a first generation Korean immigrant. I came to the United—my parents brought me to the United States when I was about three, but so I'm technically a first generation immigrant. In practical terms, mentality, acculturation, I'm like a second generation Korean American.

[00:55:48]

KM: Birth date?

[00:55:50]

HS: Birthday, September 11, 1965, and that didn't have as much meaning up until you know 9/11 and but I'm forty-four years-old now and I think about food differently than I did when I was thirty-four and I think about food differently than when I was twenty-four and when I was fourteen. I didn't have a very varied food palate I think. I didn't really like vegetables a whole lot until I was in my later teens and early twenties. Frankly I didn't even like a lot of ethnic foods until I reached my later twenties. I didn't even like a lot of seafood, but then over the years I experienced more stuff. One thing that once I finally got my own car and I could drive, it's like I've always loved eating at restaurants. Even if I had no other form of entertainment, I would love doing that. Maybe it's just the convenience. I don't have to clean up afterwards. I don't have to get messy. Maybe it's partly just being served or partly being able to experience something that hopefully is executed very well and being able to experience a lot of variety that I may not be able to do myself. That's always been really exciting to me, so I've always done that.

[00:57:21]

KM: Do you have brothers?

[00:57:22]

HS: I've got three younger brothers. Two of them work in the family business, one does not. We're all married now. We all have kids. So how this works in the family business—I think it's very positive. I'm very thankful that (a) we all get along well and we all support each other

and we actually enjoy working with one another and I think that's- fairly rare now. And like I said, the type of closely held family business it's—in this industry is not very common anymore.

[00:58:08]

KM: Your father was the founder [of Buford Highway Farmers Market], or your parents?

[00:58:10]

HS: My father, yeah. Nothing would have happened if my father had not had the vision many, many, many years ago.

[00:58:17]

KM: When was that?

[00:58:20]

HS: Oh that would have been his original incarnation, although from a corporate legal standpoint there's not a continuous line, but from the concept early seventies [1970s]—early seventies. And you know (a) he wanted a business; two, he decided that it was going to be the food business, the Asian food business; three, he tried to break out into the mainstream and it didn't work. And the businesses you know changed hands to the next generation and over the past three years what he wanted is finally taking place. It's becoming more mainstream, not just because we finally have a product that is kind of more mainstream because the mainstream is now much more interested in the ethnic food category. So it's kind of like it met in the middle you know. I don't know whether—maybe it was just inevitable that would have happened, but you know at the end of the day I like food. I don't think I'm the best businessman in the world. I'm not perfect by any means. We don't have an endless, you know –we don't have a Board. We don't have like shareholders and I don't have the war chest that Wal-Mart or you know a lot of other companies do, but you know sometimes we'll sit around, “Hey what's this taste like?”



We'll run down and open up a couple of jars and stick spoons in it and everybody tries it. Hmm, what's this go with and then ask the people questions? And we learn a lot by asking our employees. We ask customers. We have fun with it.

[01:00:10]

You know sometimes we sit around, oh eat this, no I'm not going to eat that. You eat it, you try it first. You know it's very playful and it's very educational. And sometimes it's very surprising and that's one of the more fun parts of our work is just kind of trying something new you know.

[01:00:31]

KM: Is your dad still involved in the business?

[01:00:34]

HS: Somewhat. He pops in from time to time. I'd categorize him as semi-retired, so you know—. He lets us pretty much handle everything and kind of take it to the direction where it needed to go, you know.

[01:00:49]

KM: Where do you see it going?

[01:00:53]

HS: Um, my honest answer is I don't know and, as I get older, you know, I could tell you well we're going to grow by fifty percent and do this and take over the world and, you know, that stuff. I don't know that. You know anybody who has ever owned their own business, in a way it's kind of like you're having a child. You've invested so much in it, you've spent so much time with it, you're emotionally tied to it, you want for it to succeed and get better, you know go

to college, marry a good person, have kids; you know that type of thing and it's the same thing with your business. You want it to be very successful.

[01:01:35]

For me the definition of success changes as I get older, so I'm open-minded to it you know and actually, to be honest, I'm actually holding my cards close in case competitors are listening I don't want, you know. But yeah, maybe you could expand, maybe not you know. I think we're very strong as a single location building a reputation as a local part of the community, which I think is very important. It also keeps us here and we actually talk to people whenever we can. You know, a large portion of our time is spent talking to customers, not just for complaints and hey what are you looking for, but you know often times they'll tell me hey, when I was in this country in such-and-such year and this happened and I stayed with this family and this is what we're eating and do you have this kind of product that I had there and we learned so much from that process. And you can really only get that by talking to the customers that come into your store.

[01:02:41]

So I mean it's a continual process. We're not perfect by any means. Like I said I'm not a genius or anything like that. But I think talking to the customer and continuously trying and doing what you can do you know it—.

[01:02:55]

KM: Are there things I have not asked you about that you want to include about your family history, about your store, about the food scene in Atlanta?

[01:03:11]

HS: The food scene in Atlanta? You know the part about there being more interest in food, the different types of food, foods from different cultures, different you know countries, everything from food consciousness, you know let's say Michael Pollan, from like how food is—the manufacture—distribution, how it's thought about in the country, food blogs, you know now you have blogs and people that are very—the term *foodie* you know, all of that stuff which I think is great, but it's also—it's like sometimes it would just—I like that and then other times it's like just don't take it too seriously, don't take it too consciously. I mean in some ways it's so important that hey this is stuff you put in your body, it nurtures you, it has this cultural connection; and other times, hey this is just food. If you like it, eat it. I'm not going to you know—sometimes it's a can of sardines; sometimes it's something elaborate, foie gras. You know sometimes it's caviar, sometimes it's imported cheese, sometimes it's Wheat Thins, sometime it's a box of cereal that you stuff in your mouth, sometimes it's Chef Boyardee macaroni, you know Chef Boyardee spaghetti and meatballs and Vienna sausages and everything that you could possibly imagine that you grew up with and enjoy and like and far be it from me to tell anyone that can or box or thing that you like stuffing into your mouth that makes you feel good I'm not going to— *[Laughs]*. You know and your health, well that's up to you. You know I'm not going to proselytize about that. If you're my friend and you have high blood pressure I'll give you my two cents but the basic idea being that food can be—it's a daily part of our lives and it can be a pleasurable experience and an experience that we have throughout our lives hopefully.

[01:05:15]

You know it's wonderful and it's wonderful to be a part of that industry and it's wonderful to be able to learn about that and experience that. And I mean it sounds trite, but you

realize there's so much you don't know. I don't know that much, you know, really. I mean I don't know that much about Korean food really or any other type. I'm still learning all the time. You know there's just so much to know.

[01:05:42]

Oh one thing that seems very exciting, I'll mention this—is when you start noticing foods from different cultures that have similarities or that—it's kind of hard to describe. It's not only that they might be like a very similar looking or tasting dish but it's kind of like huh. It's like you know why is this. You know it's kind of like, when you'd watch the TV shows and they said well you know there are pyramids in Egypt and there are pyramids in South America. And it's like whoa; you know how did this happen? You know surely there must have been aliens come down and giving this knowledge to somebody.

[01:06:24]

And in that vein kind of like when they say, well pasta was probably invented by the Chinese and came over to Italy and stuff like, and to me it's like maybe. We don't know for sure. Maybe it came about the same time. I don't know. You know it's just wheat. Maybe somebody could have figured it out simultaneously. Who knows?

[01:06:44]

But it is interesting that these things pop up. You know dumplings are very common in all parts of the world. And it may have been somebody's singular idea at one time and it just spread like wildfire. It may have come about spontaneously. I mean basically it's meat mixed with something wrapped in dough. That's nowhere near complicated as building a pyramid. *[Laughs]* So I'm sure it could have happened otherwise, but it's wonderful you know. And to try that basic food idea from different cultures whether it's a Russian a Pelmeni, Korean Mandu, you

know pot-sticker, Empanada, you know ravioli, whatever you call it, it's wonderful. It's like you see this kind of like oh it's kind of similar but it's still different you know. It's a lot of fun.

[01:07:37]

KM: Are there any specific intersections that you see with the Southern food?

[01:07:44]

HS: Southern food and other cultures or Southern food and—?

[01:07:48]

KM: Is there any Southern food tradition that you see riffs of?

[01:07:53]

HS: I would say Southern food, one would possibly be in terms of frying, you know foods that are fried, which are also—it's in some form in most cultures. Now they may fry a little bit more in olive oil or butter or you know something but you know once people figure out how to fry food, I believe it's actually a pretty efficient way to cook and an economical way to cook and it does impart very good mouth feel when it's done right.

[01:08:41]

There's nothing quite like—of course now we have this idea that fried food is bad for you. It probably is excessively. But you know there's a reason why it caught on—because it tastes great you know. But you know that type of—and there's a lot of fried food you know in the South, but when it's done right I don't think it's necessarily unhealthy and like I said it tastes fantastic. But you see like a lot of that in certain Latin American cultures and you see it in certain Asian cultures and the idea that a lot of the food traditions began—actually some of the tastiest food traditions began from what you would consider people of low means you know that the parts of the animal, the type of plant that you're cooking, which probably might have been

considered a weed or a really ugly plant to most people that maybe the upper classes just wouldn't have touched. But people cultivated. They I guess experimented with it and ultimately they made a dish which was hearty, nutritious, very satisfying and tasty. And that people you know you don't consider that to be a poor man's dish. You know this is just good food.

[01:09:58]

So that part and, you see a little bit of that I think in all the other food cultures because predominantly the masses of the people are not you know, that have the most money and can afford the finest ingredients and the fresher stuff and everything like that but given their ingenuity that they will figure out a way if it's possible to make this thing taste good. And I think when you look at the food cultures and the food tradition that's what happened. This is what we've got around us, this is what's available to us. Let's try and figure out a way to make this tasty and that's what they did because this is what we eat and we want it to be a positive experience. And that's what I think that all cultures ultimately do with whatever they have.

[01:10:52]

KM: I think that's all of my questions.

[01:10:55]

HS: Okay, sure.

[01:10:55]

KM: Thank you.

[01:10:56]

HS: No problem.

[01:10:56]

[END INTERVIEW]