Interviewee: Chef Kiran Verma  
Interviewers: Angela Hui, Mei Leebron  
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Transcribed by: Angela Hui (7/29/2019), Mei Leebron (7/30/2019)  
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Background: Chef Kiran Verma was born on September 11, 1954 in Jharsuguda, India and grew up in Delhi with her parents and older siblings. Her father worked in civil aviation, and her mother was a professor of Hindi. Verma attended college for two years before getting married and moving to Houston, where she worked as a bank teller for several years before opening a barbecue restaurant. After her children went to college, she began to work at a restaurant called Ashiana’s, of which she later became the chef and owner. In 2005, Verma opened Kiran’s, a renowned Indian fine dining restaurant now located in Upper Kirby.

Setting: This interview was conducted on July 29, 2019 at Chef Kiran Verma’s restaurant, Kiran’s. Chef Verma discussed her family, career, and legacy. The interview lasted about an hour and sixteen minutes.

Key:
KV: Kiran Verma  
AH: Angela Hui  
ML: Mei Leebron  
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop  
….: speech trails off, pause  
Italics: emphasis  
[Brackets]: Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]  
(?): Unclear word or phrase

Transcript:

AH: Today is Monday, July 29, 2019. We’re conducting an interview with Chef Kiran Verma for the Houston Asian American Archive, a project managed by the Chao Center at Rice University. I’m Angela Hui.

ML: My name is Mei Leebron.

KV: Very nice to meet you.

ML: Nice to meet you.

KV: I’m Kiran.
AH: Nice to meet you too. Yes. Um so, Chef Verma, when and where were you born?

KV: I was born in a city called um, Jharsuguda and the state was Orissa. And country: India.

AH: Um—

KV: And I was born in 1954. September 11, 1954.

AH: Great. [KV clears throat] Um, and did you also grow up there?

KV: I grew up in Delhi because my father worked for Indian government and you know, in those days, when you work for government, he was in civil aviation and he was an air controller. So when you have that job, you are transferred to every c—different city wherever they are making new airports or wherever they have the airports uh, for flying.

AH: Um, and so where was your family from in India?

KV: So, originally my parents came from Pakistan. W—I mean it’s called Pakistan now but in—before 1947, this was one country and it was called India. So, both of them were from North-West, uh, Frontier.

AH: Okay. Um, and what languages did you grow up speaking?

KV: Uh, Hindi, which is our national language, and English was always compulsory because uh, our subjects in school were taught in English. [AH: Mhm] And then there are some dialects you pick up and you have neighbors and friends of, you know, who speak that dialect. So I did pick up Punjabi, which is another language. And Hindi, as I said. Urdu is very similar to Hindi and which is from uh, Pakistan.

AH: Okay. Um, and so what kind of family and community did you grow up in? So, what were your parents’ occupations? Your—your father uh, worked with airplanes you said?

KV: Yeah, so, you know, he would make um, help in making air manuals for the pilots. So you know, when pilots do the routing, and... as I understood as a child, I think they kind of draw the maps for them. They also safety manuals, like, you know, what you have to do when something happens in the plane or what do you have to do to even be eligible for flying. So those kind of rules and communication with the pilots.

AH: Mhm. And how many siblings do you have?

KV: We have three sisters and one brother and I’m the youngest.

AH: Um, and so did you all live together in one home?
KV: Yes, we all lived in Delhi in one home, but when um, my father was traveling, and when we were very small, we will travel in different cities. But when we were in, like, high school, my mother did not want us to change the schooling so much. So we stayed in Delhi.

AH: Okay. Um, so what kind of schools did you attend throughout your childhood, you mentioned that English was compulsory, [KV: Uh huh.] means everything was taught in English. So was that for all schools? So what kind of school did you go to?

KV: So, of course, these were coed schools. And uh, they were very much influenced by British teachers um, because, you know, Britishers had influence in India, they were ruling India for many years. So um, at- you would call them public schools.

AH: Mhm. Um, and do you know how your family was affected by British rule?

[sirens in the background]

KV: Actually, I feel like when Britishers were ruling, they added more education to the system. They added um... I would say um... like, the lifestyle of the people who worked for the government was more lavish and more in a European style. [AH: Mhm.] And people who didn't work for the government didn't have much British influence. So they were raised in a much simpler way. We were lucky enough, you know, and of course, somebody would just say, why is that lucky, being raised in a European way, because it was more uh... I would say it was more uh... luxurious. [AH: Mhm.] You know, having help at home, because you were working for the government and government will provide, you know, like, lot of house help and housing for—and uh, medical care and all that.

AH: Okay. Um, so what were your responsibilities growing up just in the household?

KV: So, as of course, growing up you are um, not cooking at home, or you're not cleaning, or you're not like, hundred percent doing that, because, you know, being uh born in Indian family, their biggest thing is it—and also my mother was I forgot to tell you that she was a professor. And so her big thing was educating her kids. And even when my dad was traveling, my mom would, uh, raise us as almost single parent and she was very, very uh, personally involved in uh making sure that we were going to school properly, we were being educated. If we were weak in some subject, we had tutors for that. So long time was spent in studying.

And um, actually, I was very much into debates, I was very much into sports. I was into dramatics. And my mom would actually not be very happy about dramatics and debates. And she would think it's a waste of time, because it would take away from my studies, and she would think, uh, you know, I need to be a doctor and I, when you have to be a doctor, you just have to study 24/7. That was, you know, growing up was their mentality, like to be very, very strict about education. So sometimes I literally had to make up an excuse if I had to practice for my sports, or I had to practice for my debate or dramatics. And I would say, “Oh, I had a extra
physics class, I have an extra chemistry class” because I just wanted to do that. But, uh, of course, uh, you know, I became more all rounded, but it did take away if I really look back, it did take away so much of time from my attending those classes, studying and all that. So in a way they were right. But my passion was so much into other things, which I couldn't stop.

AH: What kind of sports did you play?

KV: Badminton and uh, tennis and um, we have volleyball in India which you play over the net. And uh, I think these are the kind of—and like, I was so much into hurdle race and races and all that, you know, in India, when you're young, they have like fifty-meter race, hundred meter race and hurdle race. That just, I don't see that as much in America as we had in India.

AH: Um, so where did your mother teach and what subject did she teach?

KV: So she was teaching in uh, [inaudible] college in Pakistan. And she was teaching Hindi, which is our language, because she had done bachelor's in those days in Hindi.

AH: So when you moved to Delhi, did she still teach at a university?

KV: No, she didn't. She actually taught in a small private school, um, like a part time in between. But she did not really do it as a career because my father was traveling, it was just taking care of four kids was more than enough for her. [clears throat]

AH: So what values would you say you learned from your family and your community?

KV: I feel like I learned so much about value of education, value of hard work, um, value of being independent like my mom. She was very independent person. In those days, women weren't as independent as she was. And uh, she always had so much vision that the family should be flourishing. We should live in bigger houses, we should, you know, have more lavish life. And uh I guess better living than what we could afford. But she said, if you work hard, you will do it. And she wanted all of us to be very, very successful.

And I think when my children were growing up, I didn't realize I was doing the same thing, saying the same things to my kids. Literally, like when my son was in uh, band, I still remember my mom would say, why are you wasting his time in band, he's not gonna be a bandmaster. You know, in India, they call it bandmaster. [laughs] And I would say, nobody, you know, friends are taking, and I have to my daughter to ballet. And um, she took a lot of Indian dancing. And so she would always say, “You are spending your time and, you know, giving something your kids, which is not going to be of any use in their career later in their life. Why are you wasting money and time on that?” And I had to kind of because I was in this country. And I had seen people do that. And I wanted my kids to be just like other American kids who were going for ballet and who were in music and in choir and basketball, football, everything, you name it, and I made them do it. You know, if they were interested, we said, “Go ahead.” We never stopped them from there.
AH: So, was it common back then for women to attain your mother’s level of education?

KV: No, it wasn't very common. Women more stayed home. My grandparents uh—actually, my uncle was, uh, my mother's brother was very much into education. And he insisted that my mother go to college, so she went to college in those days.

AH: And how did your parents meet? Do you know?

KV: So in India, of course, uh it always has been arranged marriages. And my parents had arranged marriage and I had arranged marriage.

AH: I see. Um, so when you were—when you were younger, what aspirations did you have for the future when you were growing up?

KV: So, you know, um, when you're young, you always feel like, you see your peers. And um, especially if your peers who are more influential, like uh, financially more stable, you have a tendency as a child to follow them. And you always want to look like them, you want to dress up like them, you kind of start acting like them, you know, and whatever they are doing, you always feel like that's the right thing to do. And uh, so I feel like I always wanted to be very, very successful, and do things independently.

And um, I was very fond of cooking. And I felt like whenever I made something, cook something I got a lot of affirmation from my father, my mother and I felt like I could prove myself that I'm better than everybody, you know, like all my brothers and sisters or something, because I was youngest. So I wanted to always prove myself that I can do this and to get their attention more. Like now I kind of feel this must have been the reason at that time, you don't know. But you know, later you analyze yourself. How did nobody else went to do cooking except me? And I remember even as a child, I would get into the kitchen and try to help my mom and doing so much of cooking and even our helpers to help them with cooking.

AH: So you did cooking a lot as a hobby?

KV: A lot of cooking. Even like, very small. When I said cooking, means like you don't know how to make full meals. But you know, whatever you can do or let's make a chai or let's do—make the you know we call it Indian bread is flat Indian bread almost like naan [AH: Mhm.] but you call it roti at home you make roti. So my dad would always say, “Oh, hers is the best, it's round. It's thin. It's fully baked, you know, like, perfectly baked,” he would say. And it’s not burnt, and I would get so excited to prove like and get his attention to make best roti or best, you know, like vegetables and stuff like that.

AH: So when you were a child, what was your favorite thing to cook?
KV: I think to make uh, Indian flatbread as I said, roti, paratha, to make lentils to make uh—not too much naan where they did come from a more vegetarian kind of a family. So just different kinds of vegetables.

AH: And what was your favorite thing to eat?

KV: Lot of street foods. [laughs] Lot of fun street foods.

AH: Uh, did you end up [KV coughs] enrolling in a university?

KV: So I did go to college. But I only finished two years because when I was in third year, I got married. And I came to this country and I left my education then.

AH: Mhm. Um, so why did your parents choose to have you get married um at that time?

KV: So, you know, in our times, girls got married by eighteen, nineteen, twenty. And uh, when my parents found out that my husband, who was, you know, going to University of Houston here for his master's, he was coming home to get married and like, somebody had introduced us, and they said, “He's such a good guy.” And well-settled, and you know, in U.S. and his family was really nice. So, my parents agreed. And they asked me, and I met him and I liked him. And I said, “Yeah.” And you know, because you just feel like, okay, you have to get married. And at that time, you know, you always want to… as I said, you—so the only way women in those days really got fancy dressed up and you know, like fancy shoes, fancy job was once you got married. So for girls, always it was like, oh, let's get married. And then you know, you'll get clothes and jewelry and shoes. So you were just so excited about—you didn't even really, I think know what marriage was all about.

AH: Um so, when you were in college, where a lot of your friends already married?

KV: No, nobody was married. Actually, I was literally the first one to get married in our group.

AH: Wow.

KV: Yeah.

AH: And were you very excited about that?

KV: I was. [laughs] I was so excited I can't even tell you. I met my husband on second of uh, December and I got married on eighth of December.

AH: Wow. What was the wedding like?

KV: It was a big wedding. It was very traditional Indian wedding. I wore a Indian, you know, traditional clothes.
**AH:** Oh, and sorry, backing up a little. Um, did you have any—were you raised with any religious views?

**KV:** Hindu religion. Yeah.

**AH:** Mhm. And that was the most common?

**KV:** Yes. And I'm still very strong about my religion. But you know, Hindu religion, also, when I say I'm strong about it, it's very open. And it's about like, it makes you believe and respect every religion. Because they—we always believe like, there is only one god. But with different names, you can we can call it Ram and Krishna and you can call it Jesus and somebody else. But no religion basically teaches you to be violent. No religion teaches you to steal, hurt. So basic teachings of every religion is same. So we do respect all religion. [AH: I see.] But the only you know, of course, we always feel like, you know, when you do good karma, it comes to you when you do bad karma it comes to you. So these are few teachings of um Hinduism, which I truly believe in. And as you get older, you become kind of more religious. You deeply think about if something small, bad happens to you feel like was it due to this? Was it due to that? You question yourself. So when I felt like over the years, when you know, you become like that person, you have a tendency to do less wrong things in life, because you're always worried of being punished in a wrong way. You know?

**AH:** Mhm. Yeah. That makes sense. Um, so when you found out that you would be moving to Houston, how did you feel about that?

**KV:** So I knew while getting married, that I was going to be coming to U.S. But when I came here, I was very, very homesick. I, you know, first of all, you are with somebody you don't know. And that's, you know, um, it's a lot of adjustment, then also leaving your family, your siblings, your, like parents. You know, when you're young, and you live with your parents, you don't value them, you just take them for granted. You take your siblings for granted. As soon as you leave them, and you come to different country are so far away. It's like, there is no way I can even explain that, the feeling of all owners, and then like, everybody died for you in a way, you know, like you, I used to just cry and cry and cry.

And uh, what really helped me was I started working in a bank. And somebody had mentioned to me that, you know, since you still very homesick, why don't you go out and look for a job. And I said, I don't have any skills. I don't know, typing. I don't know, bookkeeping, I don't know, anything at all, you know, in college in second year in India. As I said, it was all bookish knowledge, nothing, no practical, no trainings, nothing at all in our times. And I said, this—oh but your English is good. You, you can, I'm sure. And you're Indian, and your math must be good. So you can be in a bank, [laughs] you know, and this person really literally took me to bank in downtown in Texas commerce bank, and I'm talking about forty-five years back. And I got the job. And I started working as a teller, after little training from the bank.
AH: How old were you when you moved to Houston and got married or got married and moved to Houston?

KV: I got married at eighteen and I moved here same time.

AH: Wow. That’s younger than we are.

KV: Yeah. [KV and AH laugh]

AH: So what, what were some of the biggest adjustments that you had to make moving to the U.S.?

KV: I think, uh, culturally, I was very excited to adapt to this culture, because it was more Western. So you know, you're young, you want to wear nice Western clothes, you want to uh, you have the independence of shopping, going, enjoying friends, all that was acceptable. But I was just so attached to my family. So staying away from them was like a big adjustment. Like not being able to see my parents every day and not being able to, you know, like, I did not realize like coming to this country is like almost one way. It's not like, oh, I can get up and go. In those days, even like, if it was four and five hundred dollar airfare, it was so much money you literally saved for years to think you have to go back home. It wasn't like right now, you know, people just get up and go people get up and make a phone call. It would take us literally weeks and months to even think we can make a phone call it was four to five dollars a minute. And you know, minute, it goes like this, and you spend fifty, sixty dollars on a telephone. And that's a lot of spending out of your little money you have.

AH: So, how often would you call your family?

KV: I think once a month.

AH: And did you communicate with them any other way?

KV: L—lots of letter writing, oh my gosh, I would write fifteen, sixteen pages of letters to my mom and dad. And like I would write and I’ll start crying. And I'll start writing and I'll start crying. And you know, like it was—I just even cannot even express at this time like what made me cry so much at that time. It wasn't my husband wasn't nice. He was such a nice person. It was just, I think I did not realize what it was to leave family and home and come here.

AH: Mhm. Because when you were attending college did you live with your family still?

KV: Mhm.

AH: I see.

KV: In India, basically, you always lived at your home, um, before you get married, and after you get married the girls go to husband's house. And basically like if my brother gets married,
his wife will come and stay with us. And when we get married, we go to the other person's house. That's how it used to be our culture.

**AH:** Um, and since you were the youngest sibling, had your siblings already gotten married when you had?

**KV:** Yeah.

**AH:** Um, and what was that like?

**KV:** Um…

**AH:** Did they tell you about what it was like to leave home? Or did you see them often still?

**KV:** No, actually, sorry, my oldest sister got married. My brother who was older to me did not get married. And one sister, she's mentally challenged and she has never gotten married. And you know, me and my brother take care of her. So six months in a year she comes and stays with me. And six months, she stays with my brother. [**AH:** I see.] I mean, it's not calculated six months, we just feel like whenever she's not doing too well there, she'll come here and she's homesick then I send her back.

**AH:** Um, so does your brother also live in Houston or where—?

**KV:** No. He is in India.

**AH:** Oh. I see, I see. Um so, when you first came to the U.S., were you able to meet other people from India?

**KV:** Ye—so, there weren't *this* many Indians fifty years back or forty-six years back, they were very, very few Indians and actually *that* helped me to overcome homesickness when I met other Indian friends and like we would then start going—so, University of Houston used to have um, Indian movies, Indian cultural little bit programs. So, as and when more and more Indian started coming, people started connecting and you start feeling at home. And then you know, basically, food is the only thing I think that makes um, people feel at home. If you see the kind of food you're used to eating in your country, and that food is there, then you start feeling at home. So, what was really helpful was when they started opening more Indian grocery stores, smaller Indian restaurants, and that helped all of us to kind of feel like we're back home.

**AH:** Mhm. How did you meet these other people from India?

**KV:** So, some of them, you know, um, when whenever we would go to University of Houston to see Hindi movies or whenever you went to like grocery shopping and in Indian stores and you met Indian people, you just—they would always say “Where are you from in India?” and you would say, “Delhi.” Or somebody would say, “I'm from Bombay,” and somebody would say, “I'm from Delhi.” So, you just start meeting people and some people then my husband was
working uh—his colleagues were Indian, some of them and their wives and then we kind of made groups like that.

**AH:** Was it easy to find all the ingredients you needed to make Indian food?

**KV:** Not in the beginning but literally within five to seven years, there were many, many Indian grocery stores and it was fine. Even when there was one grocery store, it wasn't like this much availability, but with combining those ingredients and spices with things which were available in American store totally made sense because Indian food is something so simple I feel. You just use fresh ingredients and anything which is available in this country if you know proper usage of spices you can make it taste Indian. There's nothing with you can say oh this fish, or this lamb, or this chicken, even beef I feel like everything you can incorporate Indian techniques and Indian spices and it tastes Indian food.

**AH:** Um, so what kind of ingredients were initially hard to find?

**KV:** In—initially?

**AH:** Mhm.

**KV:** I would say certain kind of vegetables which were grown in India, because you know, you can’t get those fresh some fruits in India. Like now, you just turn around and there are mangoes and pomegranates and lychee and these were all Indian fruits. And now you know, you never feel like we are not in India, every time you turn around. Actually the quality of some of the product is so much better even if it comes from India, then what you get in India.

**AH:** And what kind of new ingredients did you incorporate um, that you encountered in the U.S.?

**KV:** In the restaurant you mean?

**AH:** Oh no, [KV: Oh.] when you first came here.

**KV:** Oh first—in uh—in everyday’s cooking?

**AH:** Mhm.

**KV:** I just feel like, you know, I would get flour and um, lentils and… you know, all the ingredients, you really could get it from Indian stores. You made Indian food. It wasn't very different as with as you know. So—sometimes people can think like, oh, you don't get this and it may not be same red carrot, which we got in India, but it was orange carrot, and people would say, oh, it doesn't taste as good. But Indian carrot stays because it's all organic there. But at that time, you know, people here weren’t so much into free range and organic and all that, you know? And people would say, “Oh, it tastes different.” And I did think it is different. But I was so young, that it was so easy to adapt. I bet like if my mom came or somebody else came at that,
like much older age, it's hard for them to adjust. But when you're young eighteen-year-old, it's so easy to adapt to different culture.

AH: Mhm. How long had your husband been in the U.S. by the time you got married?

KV: So… four years. He came in ’67 or ’68 I think, yeah.

AH: And what was he studying at the University of Houston?

KV: Mechanical engineering.

AH: Okay. And is he a m—and was he a mechanical engineer after that?

KV: Yes. He actually was a very successful mechanical engineer. He retired last year. And he worked for Kellogg. In the beginning when we got married, it used to be called MW Kellogg. And they used to have office here in Greenway Plaza where I am now. [laughs] And it was I think 3 Greenway Plaza. It's so crazy to even think back where we started. I ended up in the same place after forty-six years. And then uh, he worked for Bechtel. And uh, Bechtel is also an engineering company, it’s in Galleria and he worked for them for thirty-five years.

AH: So, how long did you work at the bank?

KV: So I worked for the bank ‘til I had my children, which was about eight years, my first daughter was born. Uh, first child was born in uh, in 1980. So about eight years, seven, eight years. Sorry, I take my word back, not seven, eight years. I actually worked for bank for about four years. And then we started a restaurant called Kabob-B-Q. [AH: Oh, okay] And that was a barbecue and shish kebab restaurant. And um, then, you know, we ran it very successfully. I was very happy with the business. But it was very challenging to have raising a little child. I wanted to give her full attention and having a restaurant did not let me. So we sold the restaurant right away when she was born, and I took care of my both of kids. Then my son was born in 1982. And uh, actually, 1995, ’96 and I had my first Indian restaurant Ashiana, I almost stayed home.

AH: Right. Turning it over to Mei.

[KV clears throat]

ML: So, you said your first job in the United States was as a bank teller?

KV: Uh huh.

ML: So what made you decide to enter the restaurant business?

KV: So um, you know, I used to always be so passionate about cooking growing up. Then when I came to this country, I said, I just got into cooking so much because I would miss home. And then when I cooked Indian food, I felt so much at home, and I felt de-stressed, and I felt very happy. So then when you make so many friends, we would have Indian gatherings, parties at
home, invite all these friends. And I started cooking for like, fifty people at home and sixty—and people would say, “Oh, you need to have a restaurant.” And you know, it just gets to you. And then also, I felt like, that's something one thing I could do without having a lot of an education in this country, and be successful. So develop my passion into or a hobby almost into my career. And I felt like that's something I won't have to depend too much on people. I didn't know I was gonna take the restaurant to this. It was a small restaurant when we bought the first one. And I said, you know, with few employees, and I can be cooking, and I'll develop the menus, and I'll do—so uh, I think it was because I felt like that was something I didn't need too much of education to be successful. Just a hard work would help me to do that. And I was very confident about my hard work and my focus.

**ML:** So you said that you discovered your passion of cooking when you were young and you would help your mom in the kitchen. Was there any particular dish that was your favorite?

**KV:** So I was very young. And I know I've uh been told time and again by my family. And I don't have too much remembrance of that. But my brother always tells me one time my mom was not well and I had made it's called kichdi. K-I-C-H-D-I. And it's a lentil and rice stew. And so my mom must have liked it so much. And every time then everybody wanted to eat kichdi. And they would always say, “How did you make? Or you want to go ahead and make?” And I had seen I think my housekeeper how to make and I copied her how she had made. So that was one dish I enjoyed making because everybody just thought I made the best. [laughs]

**ML:** How did you learn to manage a kitchen and cook in a restaurant environment?

**KV:** Really um, the first restaurant of course, when we open, which was a barbecue restaurant, and uh, it was just reading cookbooks at that time, there weren't Food Network shows and all and of course, you know, it was a barbecue, which was something very different than Indian food I was used to. But the reason we thought of barbecue because I wanted to open in mainstream restaurant which Americans would easily adapt to. I didn't want to open Indian because uh Americans weren’t used to Indian food. They would always say, “Oh, we don't like Indian too much. It’s spicy curries. Greasy.” You know, sometimes they would say—so you kind of felt like not encouraged to open that. But I would see all these successful restaurants like Luther’s, Deremis, all these barbecue places having lines and lines of people. So I said, “Okay, it's just roasting of meats and making few sauces, potato salad, coleslaw, beans. These are easy.” I read the recipes, and uh got excited about opening that restaurant. And we were very successful in that. And um, you know, you hire few people.

You learn from them but also then things, you know—I think the management—either you have it in you, or you don't. And I remember, you know, everybody in my family always thought I could manage how I could manage with people much easier than anybody else. So I don't really remember how did I learn how to manage them. But I just knew once you set up the rules, and this thing people do end up following I think you growing up, you just learn that. You learn from
your managers, like when I worked at the bank, you learn how they, you know, of course, you want your job. So you are in time, you have to complete your work, you have to follow the rules, you have to dress up the way they want you to dress up. So then you have a vision for your restaurant or your business and you set up your rules and you know, but you just have to when you have a restaurant or any business, you have to be almost like family to your employees. You have to understand them. It's not I'm not strict with them, but I have a good relationship with them when it's work. They know I mean work. But when it's playtime, we do have—enjoy that also. And you know they have family needs, sometimes they need time off sometimes. They need some advances, you know, but like they have been with us. So when I know it's the true need, I'll help them out in any way I can.

ML: So, you said you were hesitant to open up an Indian restaurant. So what made you finally open up your first Indian restaurant?

KV: So actually many, many years back when we opened the first restaurant, uh Ashiana, it was already in business. [ML: Okay.] And somebody um—I had actually just gone for a cup of chai over there and was talking to this guy and he was from Pakistan. He's a Muslim. And he says, um, you know, if—I feel like you'll be so good at—just talking to me, I don't know why he thought I would be so good at being um, working in his restaurant or having something to do with this business. So he said, “Why don’t you help me out with this, and if you like maybe you can do a part of the restaurant which will involve the bar part because I’m Muslim, we can’t sell liquor and we—so if you take over the bar and I’ll do the Indian food side, maybe we could make a good partnership.” I really had no idea who he was. And I got so excited because my children were about to go to college at that time. I knew I needed to do something. And my husband was traveling. I wanted to, uh, work and I wanted to do something which I enjoyed and I wanted to do something, as I said, I knew I was good at.

And I said, “You know, uh, this is—does not require too much of work, running a little bar in a restaurant.” But, uh, I think I did not really realize once you are inside the premises, even if you own this little part, it’s still your image. It’s yours then, you know? And nobody’s going to say, “Oh, Kiran just works here. And she cannot change the look of the restaurant or the food of the restaurant.” So I saw a lot of flaws in the way it was being run over there. And, uh, I started changing things around slowly and slowly. And one day the owner asked me if we wanted to buy the place because he had small kids, he could not run, uh, and work this many hours, and I was excited about it. We made him an offer and I bought the place. And, uh, then we changed it completely according to what we wanted to do.

And even in those days, I remember, people had never had that kind of Indian food in a restaurant. And, uh, it was, like, really in the blink of eye a big success. Just because, uh, I kind of felt like, “Okay, I want to make Indian food, but, I mean, I want to make good food with Indian flavors.” I can do salmon. But in salmon, I could do a little bit of spiciness. I’m not making a salmon curry, but I will make it little spicy, not very bland. Or I’ll make a rice that
goes with salmon spicy and put that salmon on top of the spicy rice. You know what I mean? [ML: Mhm.] Like, I wanted to keep the look and the feel of American food or French food or any food I was taking over, uh, to kind of our cuisine, but I didn’t want to change that protein. And I would want the sides or chutneys to be served with that. And people were so used to having salmon but they didn’t think, “Oh, cranberry chutney, which is spicy, goes so well. Oh, the rice with apricots and cranberries can go well,” or “I’ll do the mushroom—and I’ll do the mushroom with little bit of more spices than the regular mushroom.” And everything I would pair was literally what Americans were already eating, but it was just cooking it a different way.

ML: So, what made you want to open Kiran’s in 2005 after owning Ashiana?

KV: So, uh, lot of our guests would always say uh, “You need to be inside the Loop.” You know, and I would just, uh, get so excited about because inside the Loo—owning a restaurant inside the Loop was considered such a high-end thing to do. And, uh, Ashiana was small, it was in a small strip shopping center. And, uh, actually there is a little story behind that. Is, uh, I had it in my mind always to move here. I wa—and I found out Tony Vallone of Tony's was about to sell or, uh, close his restaurant. And he reached out to me and he said, “Kiran, you know, whenever we meet you have been thinking of moving inside the Loop. Do you want to buy my restaurant? I'm, uh—my restaurant in Greenway Plaza is ready and I'm moving.” And I was so excited because it was like the restaurant with the most reputation. It was such a high-end restaurant. I love their wine cellar in the basement. I said, “Yeah, we will.” So I got so excited. I right away told all my employees without even—when we had bought I just told my employees that we will be selling this and I'll be moving over there.

So, as soon as this news got out, uh, many of my employees, uh, wanted to buy our restaurant. So she right away told her husband and they both came up with the money and they bought the restaurant. But I hadn't even bought Tony's at that time. So I—uh, we were still negotiating on the terms and everything. And then suddenly, when we were about to sign the papers, Mr. Vallone was told that, uh, he cannot sublease his property. And I won't be able to take over that. So now I had sold my restaurant and I don't have a restaurant. So I, uh, kept on looking around. For almost six months, I was trying to look for a place and, uh, found that Bombay Palace on Westheimer may be interested in selling, so went to New York to the owners of Bombay Palace and bought that restaurant from them.

ML: So, why did you decide to move Kiran’s from Westheimer to here?

KV: So, it was not like, voluntarily on, uh, moving here. They were redeveloping the project, [ML: Okay.] um, where we were, and our lease was finished. So I had no real—I mean, no way I could ask them not to redevelop the project. And we couldn't stay there. So we had to close that,
we were closed for a year. Then when we were looking around, we found this property and then we built the restaurant from scratch into this property.

ML: So, what was—what was that adjustment like?

KV: One year of closing?

ML: Mhm.

KV: It was very hard, because—but what really was ha—good that as soon as we closed all our guests kept on writing to me, “When is the restaurant opening?” So that gave me encouragement that everybody's waiting. So I had a lot of uh, projects, charity events, I was involved in, and I had already signed up for the whole year, so few of my friends, uh, like owner of uh, Artisans Restaurant, Jacques Fox, owner of, uh, America’s like David Cordova, all these were very good friends. So I was cooking with them for all those charity events for the year. And then I was just involved in you know, construction, designing buying things for this place. [clears throat]

ML: What does upscale contemporary Indian cuisine mean to you? And how is the food you cook for your restaurant similar to or different from the food you ate while growing up?

KV: Um, so when I say contemporary, my food is still very authentic Indian flavors. As I said, to me, putting a food—our food in beautiful white plates, uh, presentation making little bit different. Uh, making the sauces little bit lighter. That's called for me is contemporary, and, uh, but flavors like using the spices, the techniques is still very authentic Indian. And, um, of course, you know, as I said, I came from more humble beginnings and a more vegetarian family. So I did not have that much access to seafood and meats and you know, all these high-end even protein items, the basically even if you ended up eating eggs or chicken was cheaper than—I don't think so we ever ate like elk or bison or you know, venison, these kind of products, which I have on my menu. And I wanted my restaurant to have a very high-end menu with the, like, proteins which normal restaurants don't use, we wanted to make it the place where if you thought of bison burger, you wanted to come to Kiran’s, if you thought of, uh, some kind of a protein which is not easily available, you would think of Kiran’s.

ML: Um, how did you decide what market to operate in? And when you opened your restaurant, what core clientele did you have in mind?

KV: I always wanted, um, very high-end clientele not because of any reason. Because, uh, the menu you serve, if it is—the product, original price is so much higher. People cannot, you know… on regular basis, they can come for celebration, but they can't come for regular basis uh basis. So you just want to make sure your clientele has enough to pay for the meals, for the
wines, for the drinks. And uh, if you weren't buying, like let's say sea bass, our cost $28 per pound, which is like raw sea bass without cleaning even, just a little filet. And, uh, you add 30 to 40% cost to that. So if it is $48, I need a clientele who can pay $48. But I'm not going to use any other fish because I want you to be wanting that fish and come to us.

I want because I felt like if I created Kiran's as any other ordinary Indian restaurant, then I'm not going to be different, I wouldn't be able to stay in this kind of a rent place and create this kind of a place. If I didn't go extra mile using my, uh, you know, product. Using my techniques. Using like the service we provide, the plates, the glasses, do you know, like, every little thing matters when people come for experience. So we have very high-end corporate events over here, we do have, um, people who are constantly celebrating their birthdays, graduations, uh, anniversaries every day. Every day, actually my pastry chef makes minimum of twenty to twenty-five desserts, which are for just saying, “Happy Birthday,” “Happy Anniversary,” “Congratulations.” The plates are written in the morning. We used to have one pastry chef; now we have three pastry chefs. So you know it increases so much over the time, your expenses. And so your expectation from a guest is also as much as much as your guest expects from you.

ML: So I read that you—you have your own chai. [KV: Uh huh.] You developed your own chai. So what made you want to develop [KV: The chai? So this was the chai.], yes, very good, it’s very good.

KV: So, chai is, uh, like a hot tea [ML: Mmm] with cream, sugar, and spices, and uh, so when, uh—my chai is called, uh, Kiran’s Daughter, so our blend is named after her. And actually, they want to—uh, my daughter Puja, she was working in our, uh, old restaurant Kiran’s for a few years. And during—between lunch and dinner, we would both sit down over a cup of chai, and you know, kind of plan out the whole day or the next day's agenda. And, you know, hiring and other things about the business with—always have a cup of chai. But one thing, it was always on my mind whenever as customers, we went out to drink a hot tea, or when we went to American restaurant or other Indian restaurant and you ordered a tea they would always have very weak tea. And we always drink very strong chai or strong hot, uh, black tea. So I could not get that combination, which I grew up with, it—having a very strong chai. And, uh, so I would sit with my daughter and always tell her like, “You know, this is how the child should taste and it doesn't have this aroma, it doesn't have this color.” So slowly and slowly, after talking with her many, many times, she encouraged me to create my own blend, and I did this. So it’s very popular, we serve this in afternoon tea at Kiran’s. And many guests, of course, order after dinner.

ML: There's been a lot of conversation recently about authenticity in the food and restaurant business. So, I guess obviously you think au—authenticity is important. Um, so, for food to be authentic, do you feel like it needs to be reminding you of home?
KV: Yes, it's very important. And you know, like, um, literally nobody has to teach you because uh, what's authentic, what you're eating at home growing up, nobody can wipe that memory from your mind. Wherever you—even you will see, wherever you are in the world, you're always reminded of the food you grew up with. And you compare your present food or your eating habits with what you grew up to be. And for you that's authentic, it could be that authentic food is what my mom made for me. And my other friends’ interpretation of authentic is what her mom made, or what she ate outside. So basically, I feel like that's authentic to me.

Sometimes people, our guest uh, may say, you know, your food is very authentic, but you are uh, also catering to more American needs or more American palate. And, you know, I said I grew up eating very mild food, I didn't change after coming here. And then of course, when I had kids, I would make very mild food for them. So what I was feeding my kids or what I was eating, my food, I'm feeding to my guest. But those guests, if they have eaten in another Indian restaurant, or with another friend, Indian friends’ house, and they are used to very hot food, and they can just think, okay, that may be authentic. But really, um, in India, people did not make that hot food as it was taken out of the country and it was just, uh, given the title of spicy hot food. Spices, yes, but not like hot, where it really bothersome to your throat or your tongue.

ML: So Houston is considered one of the most diverse cities in the U.S. What is your view of the restaurant scene in Houston? And does it reflect the level of ethnic diversity in this city? And do you see the potential growth of the number of Indian restaurants in Houston?

KV: So, of course it's nice to have so many different kind of restaurants, and uh, different kind of foods. And because, you know, Houston is kind of melting pot, like lot of people from different countries, different cities are moving here, they have moved here over the years. And as I said, for them to feel at home is creating their own cuisine, creating their own food. But sometimes I feel like some of the restaurants, when they're opening, so many restaurants, it's hard to have ten, let's say, uh, Italian restaurants or ten Indian restaurants or ten, uh, Cajun restaurants on one strip. You are pulling the resources, the limited resources in those thirty restaurants on one street. It's not easy to sustain.

Running a business, when there is so much of, uh, concentration, I have always kind of felt like when I see so many of the restaurants now failing also as many as opening, there are a lot of them failing too and very established restaurants failing. And I feel like, uh, it's just too much of concentration. And when—I wish there was a way city would even control, like within certain mile, we want this kind of restaurant within certain miles, we can have only this many restaurants of same kind. So they could kind of control the sustaining of the business part also.

You know, at the end of the day, it’s still a business. Pe—I'm working here 24/7, because as much as it's my passion, but at the end of the day, I have to pay my ni—you know, uh, seventy
employees also, I have to pay the rent, I have to pay insurance, it is a lot of expense. So it has to make business and I can’t have ten more Kiran’s open on Richmond, and still expect everybody's going to come to us. And I hope they will. But with the same token, you know, every new restaurant would try to do what I'm doing and maybe do something better than what I'm doing. And, uh, people will have more choices in a way. You know, people should have choices, but businesses also need to be maintained. So there has to be some balance.

ML: Are you interested in expanding your business to places beyond Houston?

KV: You know, uh, my dream is really, really to go outside Houston. Because whenever our guests come, they'll always say, “Oh, I wish there was Kiran’s here, Austin, there was Kiran’s in Dallas, there was Kiran’s here.” But, um, what really, really stops me from even getting a little bit encouraged—uh, we cannot get Indian chefs from India at all. Immigration has zero allowance for giving visas to, uh, food industry from India. So, you know, one person cannot just run many businesses, you know, you're a single human being, I have to be in my own location. But if I had an Indian chef, I could train him because he knew basics. So here I have to be in my kitchen all the time, because, um, I do have, uh, I do not have any Indian chef who knew Indian cooking by birth or growing up he ate Indian food.

All these people in my kitchen have been trained by me. So I have to be there to check on their taste, their quality and everything myself. So if, uh, the only way to expand would be when immigration says, it'll be amazing if they allowed other chefs to come and run Indian restaurants. And I know they'd say, “Oh, first you have to choose from what's available here.” People who are here from India are like entrepreneurs, they are not looking for to work for other people. They literally open their own restaurants, if they have that capability. And, uh, then the people who are not in the restaurant, they are engineers, doctors, lawyers, so it's really, really hard. That's one thing which discourages me to expand this place, that not having Indian help.

ML: Is there anything you would do differently if you had the chance to go back in time to when you started your restaurant?

KV: I would, uh, make more systems, you know, like, before, even like—when I started the restaurant, I'll cook from my heart. I’ll, uh, you know, I'll see a product and I will cook as if I was cooking for my family. And, uh, because I thought I could cook for everybody business was small. So I didn't get very strong in writing the recipes. And then I would just stand and train and I thought they'll stay with me forever, right? Your employees, but of course they move on. And then again, you're ready to train other people. So I think the setting up really very strong systems and systems to make this place more businesslike, more, uh, you know, like, we have great volume, but it would be very successful financially, if I had very tight systems. I go lot with my
passion. And, uh, actually my daughter is joining us very soon. And, uh, she is leaving her job just to help me out and take the business to totally different level.

ML: Have you eaten at Indian restaurants in other countries? And did you know of any other high-end Indian restaurants when you were first starting out?

KV: Of course now I have eaten in many countries whenever we travel, and the great Indian restaurants, I love amazing Indian restaurants in India itself. In India in the hotels you have very, very good high-end restaurants and they have great, uh, very well old-time fashion, old-fashioned uh, kind of chefs who bring in very authentic cuisine to hotels, because hotel guests have very high-end travelers. And so, they're constantly you know, uh, feeding very authentic, uh, tasty food. And, uh, I think whenever I go to India I do end up visiting those hotel restaurants.

ML: How did you find your chefs and waitstaff and what is your management style?

KV: Um, of course, uh, when lot of employees hear about us, hear about our reputation, they do come and join us. But now as we get bigger we have to advertise, uh, on like different sites, for the help. And management style is, like, we keep insisting that we tell our servers especially, the front of the house, “You have to treat guests as God.” So we have are very still, in our service style, we are very old-fashioned.

ML: What is the most significant change or difference that you have noticed at work when you first started working out compared to now?

KV: Um… the guests’ expectation from a restaurant is very different than what it used to be. So you're—you have to constantly, um, study about your own product, what you’re serving, where the produce is coming, where the chicken is coming, where the fish is coming. Your guest is very, um, knowledgeable about the product. And they expect you to know the origin of your product and, uh, up—update, like, keep service style very updated, the wines, the food, it's just—I think there is so much openness, or widespread, uh... like people know about food, the techniques and do because of Food Network and the chefs and, uh, the drama behind all these shows. So people expect that kind of service, that kind of food on the table.

ML: Can you recall the biggest challenge you faced in your career? And how did you overcome it? And what does it mean to the person you are today?

KV: My biggest challenge has been to get the help. Either it's back of the house or front of the house, uh, who have same passion as I would, who have the need to satisfy a guest as much as I do. So that's been and it's still—we're struggling always to find those kind of employees.
ML: Um, if—you're not working, what kind of food do you cook, do cook with same kind of food? Or do you like to experiment and—?

KV: I like to experiment different things. But also, uh, because I spent so many hours here, I'm not much cooking at home. I'm usually trying to go out if I have a day off, and different new restaurants which are opening. And, uh, at home my really go-to food is making an omelet or scrambled eggs with my children. Like, especially my daughter, if she comes home on Sundays because she lives in Houston and my son is in San Francisco. So naturally she visits more often. So our basic, even at night, sometimes we just make an omelet and eat.

ML: So what are their names again?

KV: Puja is my daughter and Punit is my son. And they both are married.

ML: Do you feel that your children have been raised with similar or different values than how you and your siblings were raised?

KV: Same. I feel they have the same values that I was raised. And I still instill in them.

ML: Has being a parent changed you or the way that you see the world?

KV: Yes, very much, very much.

ML: Um, how has you changed?

KV: I think the things I felt like my parents were strong in, or I would do differently if I have my children, I think, um, of course, you know, maybe I’m more… giving…. and I’m more expecting, uh, not expecting, accepting my children behavior and nature than my parents would have ever. You know, we didn't talk back to our kids—uh, parents, we didn't argue, we didn’t question. Once they said they were right or wrong, we would just accept, but our children these days, you know, they would always question us, what we are doing, why we are doing and even growing up these kids would question, you know, they—and not in a bad way, I would feel like they are so much more exposed to—they have more independence. And uh, in our culture, we thought like questioning parents was not respecting them. Now we think our kids are so intelligent when they question our decision.

ML: How did your experiences growing up in India and as an immigrant affect the way you raised your children?
KV: I think, um, growing up in India, of course, was being in a more conservative way, with very limited resources. So you know, you—you're a different person, you have different habits. And, uh, when you come to America, when, you know, you have more success, because you work harder, you have more resources. And, uh, you have more opportunities here. So you become financially so much better. So you give to your kids so much more than what we got from our parents.

ML: Um, do you choose to identify yourself, um, as American, Asian American, Asian, Indian, Indian American? And what does this identity mean to you if anything?

KV: So, you know, my, um… I identify, of course, always myself as Indian. But the truth is, if you have been in a country where… almost like you're growing up here, like I was only eighteen when I was in India, and now I've been here forty-six more years. So what would I be called? But of course, by birth, I'm Indian, but by habits, by your vision, looking at things, when that—actually I may still think I'm Indian, when I go back, my family says, “Oh, you're so American,” or “You talk like American” or “You think like American” or “You spend like American,” you know, your habits, you don't notice that in yourself. But people around you, especially somebody who hasn't seen you for some time and they see you, they see the difference and they identify, but I feel like I have best of both the cultures. I'm fortunate that, uh, I had upbringing in India. And then when I got married, I adapted to this culture and, uh, for good. And now I raise my kids with the same values. So it's a much balanced life being in this country.

AH: Did you teach your children Hindi when they were growing up?

KV: Yes. And also they learned so much more because of my mother’s frequent visits to this country. [AH: Uh, so are they—] So they’re kind of forced to talk to her in Hindi.

AH: Are they fluent in Hindi?

KV: My daughter is very fluent in Hindi, my son understands and uh, but cannot talk as fluently. But he does speak in Hindi some.

ML: Uh, so when you’re not cooking or at work, do you enjoy any particular books, movies, magazines, sports, games, or other hobbies?

KV: I, I do enjoy a lot of, uh, food shows. Um, I love watching this masterclass YouTube, Netflix, food—it's all about food, food, food, magazines, about food. Because I'm working so many hours I don't get too much time. So whatever little time I get, I love to see cookbooks, I love to—anything to do with food, food, magazines, everything.
ML: Who has been the biggest influence on your life or your biggest role model?

KV: Uh… I think, um, in a culinary world, I would just say I have a very dear friend, Dr. Sherma. Uh, he's our family friend. He had a lot of wine knowledge. And, uh, when we started our restaurant, I wanted to incorporate wines in our—this thing, uh, menu in our restaurant. So he kind of got involved, he was helping us with wines, but then he got involved with the food. And, uh, because he traveled a lot, and, um, so he experienced different kind of high-end cuisines. So whenever I would cook, he would taste and he would help me kind of balance out my spices and kind of balance out different presentation. So he did help me a lot. So I would give him a credit for being my role model.

ML: So I saw, um, outside of the bathroom, you have a lot of plaques and a lot of pictures with a lot of famous people. Um, what would you say your proudest accomplishment is?

KV: Uh, repeat yourself one more time [ML: Um.], like, proud—?

ML: Uh, your proudest accomplishment? What—what would you say that your proudest accomplishment is?

KV: I would feel like, um… you know with what I really feel, the way I feel an accomplishment is… any part of the city I travel now in or I am in, people recognize you, and they respect you. And they stop and they talk to you. And that's a matter of pride. And sometime you're even sitting in the plane and somebody sitting next to you and they'll say “I'm Tricia, aren’t you at Kiran’s,” and sometimes they don't even know I own it or you know, they would just always start talking or… I've had conversations and we were in Las Vegas, I still remember, we were sitting, uh, we were in the actually ladies’ room and some women were, uh… having a conversation about the restaurants and all and there was three women from Clearlake here in Houston. And they said, “Oh over the years, this Indian restaurant has become a really very favorite. They are on Westheimer, they have a chef,” and I'm standing next to them. How crazy is that? Like, they have no clue who I am. And I have no clue what they're going to talk about. I was so shy, even listening about it that somewhere out of Houston, somebody is talking about the restaurant. And I think that's my proudest accomplishment.

ML: What are your hopes for the future in general? And it doesn’t have to be food-related.

KV: My hope would, uh… I would just think for me and, uh, my family to have this, this restaurant running for many, many years, even after I'm gone. And they continue this. But I always also say, “Don't have that pressure of running it if you can't,” because running a restaurant is also giving your 110% into this. So if they are capable of this, they will run it; if they're not, I'm okay if somebody else can run it. But I hope they keep the Indian food at a very
high level where people will respect the way they are respecting today. Because long time back people just felt like Indian food should be buffets and you know, should not be more than $5.99 buffet in the restaurants, you know. And now we have elevated, uh, the Indian food to the level of any French, Italian, American cuisine. Because it's just bringing the awareness of our culture, ingredients, our uh, strength in cooking, and people respect you for that.

**ML:** So my final question is, what legacy or advice do you have for future generations?

**KV:** Hard work in life pays off, and you have to be very focused. You have to be very honest, one thing I cannot insist enough, honesty, because when you're honest to yourself, that you can tell like oh, um, like I'm honest, that I feel like I can work. That's being honest to yourself, I can provide you this is honest to your guest. I can look after my employees for, you know, they're working eight hours, they're getting paid for eight hours or not. They're paid fairly. I just feel like maintaining honesty in a uh, business is very important. And that's the key to the, uh, sustaining your business.

**AH:** Thank you so much.

**ML:** Alright, thank you!

**KV:** You’re welcome, thank you, I don’t know, I’m not a good speaker, I’m not, uh [**ML:** Oh no, that was great] like I know you are—sometimes I just don’t know like what I’m thinking, what I’m saying, but I just say what comes to my mind.

**ML:** Alright, thank you so much for having us.

**KV:** Thank you! Thank you for your time.

[interview ends]