



**Esmail Algahdari**  
**Queen of Sheba**  
**Memphis, Tennessee**

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Date: July 27, 2021

Location: Queen of Sheba, Memphis, TN

Interviewer: Simone Delorme and Kelly Spivey

Transcription: Annemarie Anderson

Length: Twelve minutes

Project: Summer Avenue, Memphis

[00:00:05]

Simone Delorme: This is Simone Delorme. Today is July 27, 2021. And I'm recording this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance Summer Avenue documentary project. To start could you introduce yourself?

[00:00:17]

Esmail Algahdari: My name is Esmail Algahdari. My-- is 1992.

[00:00:25]

Simone Delorme: You were born?

[00:00:27]

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: Okay, In 1992?

[00:00:28]

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: And where were you born?

Esmail Algahdari: In Yemen.

Simone Delorme: In Yemen? What part of Yemen?

[00:00:35]

Esmail Algahdari: Sanaa, the main.

Simone Delorme: Is it a city or?

Esmail Algahdari: It's a city.

Simone Delorme: It's a city. Okay, okay. And tell us about what you do here at Queen of Sheba. What is your position?

[00:00:46]

Esmail Algahdari: I mean, it's owner and Queen of Sheba.

Simone Delorme: Do you cook also?

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: And you cook as well. Okay. And when did you open Queen of Sheba?

[00:00:58]

Esmail Algahdari: It's 2016.

Simone Delorme: 2016. And why Summer Avenue? How did you choose the location?

Esmail Algahdari: Because it's between everywhere. South, west, east.

[00:01:16]

Simone Delorme: Okay, the location. Okay. Okay. What challenges have you faced since opening the restaurant? Any challenges?

Esmail Algahdari: Just the food. Yemeni is the best food in the East.

Simone Delorme: In the East? Okay.

Esmail Algahdari: A lot of people just like it, our food. And they have restaurants in Yemen. I was a cook. I was everything. And I open restaurant. It was good.

Simone Delorme: So tell me, you had a restaurant before in Yemen. Can you tell me about that? That restaurant? What was it called?

[00:02:01]

Esmail Algahdari: The name is **Andaleeb** in Yemen. It's different name here.

Simone Delorme: Okay. How long did you have that restaurant?

Esmail Algahdari: Its ten years.

Simone Delorme: Ten years. Okay, okay. So tell me a little bit more about the food here at Queen of Sheba. What are some of the dishes that if someone were to come here and has never been that they could try?

Esmail Algahdari: The best food is the lamb haneeth, rice and chicken. This is for Yemen. And the hummus, hummus with meat. We have a lot of different foods. The Saltah, for Yemen. Fahsah.

Simone Delorme: How did you learn to cook?

[00:02:50]

Esmail Algahdari: Maybe, fifteen years.

Simone Delorme: Fifteen years that you've been cooking? And how did you learn? Did you go to school to cook or you taught yourself to cook?

Esmail Algahdari: In Yemen, my brother is cook, my father is cook. With the restaurant, and me, I cook with him.

Simone Delorme: Okay, so your family. Okay, okay. And when did you move from Yemen to the U.S.?

Esmail Algahdari: It was 2015.

Simone Delorme: 2015. Did you move straight to Memphis?

Esmail Algahdari: Straight from New York, come back to Memphis.

Simone Delorme: Okay. Why Memphis?

Esmail Algahdari: Because you have lot of people that is Arabic. It's a mix.

[00:03:34]

Simone Delorme: Okay, okay. Do you have family here?

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: You do. Okay, okay. What has it been like living in Memphis? How does it compare to Yemen?

Esmail Algahdari: It's--

Simone Delorme: Has it been quiet? Do you like it?

Esmail Algahdari: I like it. It's good.

Simone Delorme: And during the pandemic, did you stay open during the pandemic for some of it and you came back?

Esmail Algahdari: Yeah.

Simone Delorme: How did you stay open throughout? Was it a challenge?

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: Yes. And let's see? What are some of your customers? Do you have customers who continue to come back?

[00:04:21]

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: And are they from the Arabic community or all over? Muslim?

Esmail Algahdari: It's a mix.

Simone Delorme: It's a mix. Okay, okay. I want to ask you a little bit more about your family. Can you tell us what it is like growing up in Yemen?

Esmail Algahdari: Growing up in?

Unidentified Person: [Speaks to Esmail off recording]

Esmail Algahdari: [Responds]

Simone Delorme: What was it like, for instance, going to school?

[0:04:56]

Unidentified: [Speaks to Esmail off recording]

Esmail Algahdari: Yes, I went to school every day.

Simone Delorme: Every day.

Esmail Algahdari: Yes, I went to college and come back to work.

Simone Delorme: Okay, so you went to college there, too.

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: What did you study?

Esmail Algahdari: I studied IT.

Simone Delorme: Information Technology. How did you go from IT to cooking and restaurants?

Esmail Algahdari: Because I like technology. [Unintelligible 00:05:20]

Simone Delorme: What's the first job you had growing up?

[00:05:24]

Esmail Algahdari: It was restaurant.

Simone Delorme: Restaurant. So you never did anything in IT?

Esmail Algahdari: No.

Simone Delorme: You studied it, though. What do you do for fun growing up in Yemen?

Unidentified: [Speaks in Arabic] Hang out with friends?

Esmail Algahdari: Yeah, I go with friends.

Simone Delorme: Okay, okay. Why did you decide to move from Yemen to New York and then Memphis?

[00:05:56]

Esmail Algahdari: I first came to New York because my family is in New York, but I come from here with my cousin. He's here in Memphis.

Simone Delorme: Okay. So tell me in your family, either now or in Yemen, what was meal time like, when you would eat lunch or dinner, what would you eat?

Unidentified: [Speaks to Esmail in Arabic]

Esmail Algahdari: The first time in the morning, I ate, the Yemeni food is different.

Unidentified: [Speaks in Arabic]

Esmail Algahdari: The name is Bint al-sahn is different. [Bell Rings] Lunch is lamb or rice. Saltah, Fahsah.

Simone Delorme: And who did the cooking in your family?

[00:06:55]

Esmail Algahdari: In the home, it was my mom.

Simone Delorme: Your mom did the cooking. Did you help?

Esmail Algahdari: Yeah.

Simone Delorme: Yes? Okay, okay. And what can you tell me about your parents, your mom, your dad growing up?

Esmail Algahdari: Their names were Algahdari, the family names. [Speaks in Arabic]

Unidentified: [Speaks to Esmail]

Esmail Algahdari: My father is Mohammed. My dad is Fatima. [Interviewer's note: his mother is named Fatima]

Simone Delorme: Where they in the restaurant business too? Your parents?

[00:07:34]

Esmail Algahdari: Yes.

Simone Delorme: They had restaurants also? In Yemen? Okay, okay. So it's in the family history. Okay. Do you have any questions you want to add?

Kelly Spivey: I have some selfish questions. [Laughter]

Simone Delorme: Ask away.

Kelly Spivey: Can you tell me a little bit about the desserts on the menu?

[00:07:57]

Esmail Algahdari: The desserts are the arikah, and the masoob, fattah. Dates and bread and honey and cream cheese is the base.

Kelly Spivey: I've had the harissa. And I really liked it.

Esmail Algahdari: Harissa is good. Yemeni desserts everywhere is.

Unidentified: They've got different kinds, too, harissa.

Kelly Spivey: Oh.

Unidentified: Because they only can make one.

Kelly Spivey: Is that an ingredient?

Unidentified: [Speaks in Arabic] I think they make it of— It's like the nuts, the stuff. They just mix it together.

Esmail Algahdari: The color we make it.

Unidentified: The colors and stuff.

Kelly Spivey: Has there ever been things that you want to make but you can't make because of the difference in ingredients?

[00:09:00]

Unidentified: [Speaks in Arabic]

Esmail Algahdari: [Replies in Arabic] A lot of, lot of things is different.

Unidentified: It's hard to find everything here since the culture there is different.

Kelly Spivey: So how do you get a lot of the ingredients that you use?

Unidentified: [Speaks in Arabic]

[00:09:29]

Esmail Algahdari: We have Arabic foods, Arabic stores.

Unidentified: They ship it from there to here.

Simone Delorme: Is there anything else that you want to add that you want to say about the culture of Yemen, to teach people or about Queen of Sheba?

Esmail Algahdari: There's nothing.

Simone Delorme: There's nothing else. [Laughter]

Unidentified: [Speaks in Arabic]

Esmail Algahdari: We would love for everyone come for Queen of Sheba. It's good food for everybody if you try it. You'll like it.

Simone Delorme: Thank you so much.

Esmail Algahdari: Okay.

Simone Delorme: Perfect. We're good. Thank you so much. That was great.

[End of Interview]