

Interviewee: Kesbeh, Wesal

Interview Date: April 19, 2012

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
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Wesal Kesbeh
University of Houston Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Aimee L'Heureux
Date: April 19, 2012
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Wesal's home in Houston, TX

AL: Okay my name is Aimee L'Heureux and I am doing an interview on Palestinian food today is April 19, 2012 and I guess we can just start you can just say your name and your birth date, where you were born?

WK: My name is Wesal Kesbeh and I was born originally in Kuwait, but I'm a Palestinian, my, my family emigrated from Palestine to Kuwait after the 1967 war.

AL: Okay and so you went to school in Kuwait?

WK: Yes I went to elementary school in Kuwait, but then we moved to Jordan when I was 12 years old, and I went to what they call secondary school over there, which is kind of like middle school, and [went to] high school [there]. At 18 I graduated high school and I got married and immigrated to the United States. I've been here for almost 24 years.

AL: Wow! So did you meet your husband in Jordan?

WK: Yes, I met my husband in Jordan.

AL: And did he live in the U.S. at that time?

WK: Yes he immigrated to the U.S. when he was 17 years old. After he graduated high school, he applied for college, he went to [the University of Mary] Hardin-Baylor. He

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got a bachelor degree in Business Administration, graduated, and he came back... you know he was looking for an Arabic wife, so to speak, so he went back to Jordan. We met through an arranged you know marriage, what we call a living room wedding. Yep and we've been together ever since.

AL: Wow and he's Palestinian also?

WK: Yes, yes, yes.

AL: And so where... so you guys were in Kuwait but where specifically...

WK: He wasn't. He wasn't... he lived most of his life in the West Bank in Palestine and then at, I, I guess in 1967 he was 10 years old, he was born 1957 and he was 10 years old when he, when they left the West Bank and they traveled by land to Jordan and I think 19... I don't know, he was 17 years old, so I'm not good at math.

AL: Me neither.

WK: So he left Jordan and he came to Houston, and he went to like I said Mary Hardin-Baylor and then he got back to Jordan, we got married, and came back here.

AL: So where in the West Bank was his family from?

WK: Well actually his family, his father and mother were in the 1948 territories before there was even a West Bank.

AL: So they were relocated...

WK: Relocated then relocated. They were kicked out of the West Bank to Jordan.

They were in a small village called Barfiria and in 1948 his mother and his father were, they had to relocate through the United Nations to the West Bank in East Jerusalem in a refugee camp called the Calendia, and after the 1967 through that war he had to just leave

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with his family and his sisters, there were nine of them, four boys... actually five boys and four girls.

AL: And where was your family from?

WK: My family, my dad lived in Kuwait with his dad when he was a little boy. He left Palestine. His father was a business man, then he was going back and forth to Kuwait, from Kuwait to the West Bank, and my dad decided to stay in Kuwait and he got his high school degree in Kuwait, and he was working with the British Embassy in Kuwait. When I was 7 years old he went to Jordan to start, because things weren't going great in Kuwait for him. 1977 he went to Jordan, to start a business. He had always, he always had a passion for food so despite the fact that he worked at the British Embassy he would come home and cook after a long day of work.

AL: Wow!

WK: He wouldn't let my mom cook. She is a good cook but he was, to him cooking wasn't just a casual interest, it's more of a passion. It's in his blood. He loved to cook so he opened up a restaurant in Amman, and after that my mom decided to go to Amman to live there. He died, and my mom tried to take over the business but with 5 kids she couldn't. Then she just settled for, she closed the restaurant and she settled for cooking at home. She also did a little bit of sewing and chauffeuring. She was driving school teachers, female school teachers because back then it wasn't... you know, you know transportation wasn't that good or available in Amman so she would drive teachers back and forth from their homes to school, and that's how she raised us.

AL: Wow, she's resourceful!

WK: Yes.

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AL: So she would sew and cook and would she sell that?

WK: Yeah she would do maftoul, do you have an idea what maftoul is?

AL: I don't know exactly what it is. I've heard of it.

WK: It's the Palestinian version of couscousi, the Moroccan dish.

AL: Right, right.

WK: Yes, but she would make it. She was very good at it. She would do kibbeh and sell it. She would also do spinach pies, cheese pies, things like that. And, it got really tiring. She went back to driving, the schoolteachers back and forth to school.

AL: I bet that was tiring so was she trying to also cook for her 5 children on top of cooking for others?

WK: Yes, yes, that's what it is. But I took over the cooking. I'm the youngest of the girls. I took over the cooking when I was 12. I love cooking, ever since I could remember. It's like, my mom always said, "You know you got your dad's touch in food." She would say, you know, whenever she had, we had people over, especially my uncles when they come, most of my uncles live in the Gulf in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and I had another uncle who used to live in Germany. Whenever they come to visit us, summer time, my mom would always have me with her in the kitchen. She would always have me with her in the kitchen. I have two older sisters. One of them got married when she was 16 and she went to Kuwait. She moved out when I was really young and the other one who was just 10 months older than me wouldn't touch food. She, you know... and my mom would always tell her, "You know what? You're going to have a hard time with your husband because God forbid if he, if he ever get, marry a guy who loves food"

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she tell her, "I don't care he can fry an egg or boil an egg I don't care. I'm not cooking." So that's it is!

AL: That's funny. So, so you came to Houston because you got married and your husband was he working in Houston at that time?

WK: Yes he was working.

AL: He was already established here?

WK: Yes.

AL: Okay.

WK: Otherwise I would have never married him. [laughs]

AL: [laughs] Good point!

WK: Yep.

AL: So we already talked a little bit about food from your childhood but maybe what do you remember about, was the food in Kuwait very different?

WK: Absolutely different.

AL: Okay.

WK: My mom... well my dad used to cook for us, and my mom used to cook Palestinian dishes but also a lot of my dad's friends were Kuwaitis, and their main dishes consisted of rice and meat. And they had different flavors than the ones that the Palestinian or you know, the Palestinian, Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian region have. Their food you could say it's somewhat the spices they used are similar to Indo-Paki region. Like cari, curry like we say Cari in Arabic. The Curry, the Cardamom, the ginger... a lot of cinnamon. They cook with Cardamom and Cinnamon, they didn't do a lot of dishes that involve a lot of vegetables like we do, and like I said, mostly rice with

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different ways to cook. Sometimes it's in the brick oven. Sometimes they cook rice with a piece of charcoal and it's delicious.

AL: Really?

WK: Because you get that taste, the smokes taste, kind of like the same idea of cooking rice on a barbeque grill where you do the mesquite...

AL: Okay.

WK: ...wood chips you know? But instead of doing it on a grill, what they do is they cook it on top of the stove, but they put pieces of charcoal inside the rice and it gives it that smoky flavor.

AL: Wow!

WK: Yeah they call it dakhan or the smoked rice. Whereas in Jordan there are probably 2 or 3 Jordan and Palestine that's kind of, very similar, 2 or 3 ways to make rice that's it. We make it with the upside down which is just a layer of meat, vegetable and rice. We cook it with vermicelli, we fry a little vermicelli and we fry up the rice with the vermicelli and boil it either with chicken stock or beef stock or sometimes just plain water, others where you cook rice with chickpeas, snow peas, or regular peas and carrots. That's just it. Everything else is vegetables. Our main focus with food is on vegetables whether its eggplants, cauliflower, squash, yeah. Grape leaves, that's, that's kind of like the Palestinian you know essence of cooking. Yeah, totally different than you know the Kuwait or the Saudi region.

AL: Hmm it sounds it all sounds so good. So you, my next question was: how did you personally come to cooking and who taught you how to cook?

WK: My mom.

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AL: We already talked about that a little bit but maybe you could talk...

WK: My mom... my mom. My mom, my mom was... given the fact that my mom used to work constantly working to raise us someone had to take over the kitchen because I had an older brother and a younger brother and my, since my mom always taught me that I inherited my dad's touch in the kitchen especially with cooking I've always loved cooking. The first dish that I have ever made was the Arabic spaghetti, which just ground beef with the tomatoes and onions and green chili, hot green chilis and garlic with, where you fry it and after you boil the pasta or the spaghetti, you put it in a small pan and you cook it in the oven. That was the first thing I ever made. I over did it on the spices but it was delicious. My brothers and sisters loved it. My mom loved it and every since then I've been very involved with the kitchen.

AL: Sounds so good! So obviously since you love cooking so much I'm assuming you do most of the cooking here in the home?

WK: I do all the cooking in the house.

AL: Does your husband know how to cook anything?

WK: Yes, yes.

AL: He does?

WK: He is a very good cook, yes.

AL: He does? But this is your kitchen, right?

WK: Well sometimes we end up fighting because I'm not very, I don't, I don't respond well to criticism, constructive or destructive it doesn't matter. You will always get the same response from me. And he has, how should I put this? To him every since he's

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been to this in this country he's always, until the day he got married, he's always been the one who cooks for his friends and their wives.

AL: Okay.

WK: So when I came and I tried to take over we usually end up butting heads because he wants things a certain thing done a certain way and I want it done a certain other, another way. So we are always arguing whose method or whose idea is better than the other one. Of course I end up winning!

AL: Of course!

WK: Hands down, but that does not stop him from always you know trying to you know sneak in something, you know while I'm in the middle of cooking. Like with the egg plant dish [babbaganoush] that I made, he doesn't want me to put garlic in it, whereas I want to put garlic in it because that enhances the flavor and he's like, "No" and he saw me once where, on most of my cooking, my dad always said a little bit of sugar on every dish brings out the flavor. A little bit of sugar, brings out the flavor. And he saw me one time when I was cooking okra I sprinkled a little bit of sugar and he looked at me and he said, "What is that?" I told him, "That's sugar." "How, where do you get this crazy idea from?" I told him, "Well my dad always used to..." "You're dad he doesn't know how to eat ,how can he know how to cook?" I tell him, "My God bless his soul. No, just try it. You're not going to notice the difference I promise you." Nobody noticed. I always put sugar in my food. Even if it's just. even if it is a salty food I always put a little sugar but every since I told him that I did I guess he's paranoid or something. "Oh no I can taste the sweetness in it." I told him "Get out of town! When did you start tasting it? After I

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told you and I've been doing it for years and now you tell me you taste it!" He's like,

"Oh that's why your food is weird!" [laughs]

AL: [laughs] That's funny!

WK: No it's not!

AL: My grandmother did that too. She always put sugar in pasta sauce when she was making sauce.

WK: Because it brings out the flavor. I'm a big fan of Food Network.

AL: Me too.

WK: I'm a big fan of Food Network and if you've ever seen like the Giada De Laurentiis, the Bearfoot Contessa with the Au gratin, they always use sugar with their food, everything just a pinch. It does it brings out flavor. Just as, you know, a little bit of salt on your cake mix or the cake batter it brings out the flavor.

AL: I didn't know that.

WK: Yes!

AL: I'm going to try that!

WK: Oh yes. A little bit of salt in your cake batter, even the pancake or the waffle mix. Just put a little bit of sugar, just pinch and you will see then, it truly brings out the flavor of the batter. Because it creates some kind of chemical reaction with the sugar and all the different ingredients that it enhances the flavor. That's just it.

AL: Wow I have heard that with salt. I know somebody was making a salsa or something or just a salad that was a lot of different vegetables and you put a little bit of salt and mix it up and put it in the fridge and then all of those flavors sort of come together. I think it's something with salt and sugar that...

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WK: It's kind of like a chemical reaction. It somehow sucks out all the natural juices inside the vegetables. Just like when you, if you've ever fried an eggplant or a potato and when you put a little bit of salt on it, it immediately you notice a little bit of, you know kind of like a precipitation or a little bit of the, you know drops of water on the egg plant or the potato, because that is what the salt is doing. It somehow it attracts the juices, the natural juices of and the moisture of the egg plant and it brings it out, and that's what it does to the cake batter. That's a secret.

AL: Wow, thank you for sharing that!

WK: And you've got it on here!

AL: Now everybody knows! Do you have a specialty dish, like one dish you are known for cooking?

WK: Honestly, it's a dish but it's not a Palestinian dish that I'm really, most of my sons friend's rave about it, and I've also been known in his school for it. It's the chicken pesto pasta.

AL: Oh!

WK: Yeah. I'm also known when it comes to Palestinian dish I'm also known for the stuffed grape leaves and the makloubah, which is the upside down. But my specialty dish non-Palestinian wise is the chicken pesto pasta.

AL: Interesting, how did you learn how to make that one?

WK: I guess I'm blessed with the quality, is once I eat something, I can taste the flavors of the spices and what's in it and I can really, how should I put it, I can discern between different spices. I can really, because I know how a different sauce is made, I can picture

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how it's made and I can like do the cooking steps in my mind and I try it once and every time I, you know, I do it I perfect it more.

AL: Right.

WK: We tasted it once at La Madeleine, the French restaurant and I told them. "You know what I bet you I can do it" and I did it.

AL: That's awesome. You're not like a musical genius but a food genius. You know those people who can hear a song and play it. That's, maybe.

WK: Yeah, it's something I've got because I can try something, and I can tell you exactly what kind of spices it's in it. cardamom, nutmeg, basil, sweet basil, tarragon... anything I can differentiate between these flavors. Another dish that *all* my friends and even my husband's friends rave about is the kibbeh. I make a killer kibbeh, killer kibbeh yeah.

AL: So do you have a particular memory that comes to mind when you think of your favorite dish or your favorite food?

WK: Yes. Yes, it has to be stuffed grape leaves that my mom makes, and she puts lamb chops underneath it and slices potatoes and lemon and tomatoes and it's a huge, huge, it's almost the size of a bathtub that she makes because she, grape leaves is a summer dish and during the summer it's where every, every member of the family who doesn't live in Jordan, who lives abroad, comes to visit and whenever they come to visit my mom is like the central, you know, it's the headquarters of the family in Amman. Because we are the only family amongst my mom's and my dad's family that live in Jordan. Everybody either live in Kuwait or some of them live in Egypt. I have an uncle who lives in Egypt. So Palestinians are scattered here and there. So whenever everybody

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when, see summer time in Jordan, it's vacation time. Because the weather is amazing, the scenes, the places you go to. Even the people when you go there, it is amazing. So the favorite dish that I can still remember from my childhood. Because I remember, we used to help my mom with the grape leaves wrapping and you could see like 12 different women old and young girls like me each have a pad, a big, big stack of grape leaves and a small plate with rice and meat and you'll see us, you know, scattered three or four groups of threes or fours, in you know, corners all over the yard and stuffing grape leaves because we have people coming over. And the when she cooks it, she cooks it for like seven hours and she starts after she flips the pot, she starts giving me plates covered with the you know, sometimes she puts them in a plastic bag or sometimes she covers the whole plate with another plate and says, "Oh go take that to this neighbor." "Go give that to this neighbor" if someone comes, (this is our tradition) if someone even smells you cooking a certain dish you have to feed the entire neighborhood!

AL: Wow!

WK: And that is my favorite, my favorite memory of all because it is, to us it is kind of like a gathering event. We are making stuffed leaves, stuffed grape leaves. It's just, you know, kind of reminds you of family and it brings us closer to each other. We will drink coffee when we are cooking, we will drink tea while we are cooking. We will say jokes and we start talking endlessly about sometimes nothing. Laugh over silly things. That's how it is. That's really my favorite memory.

AL: That sounds fun!

WK: Yes, yes.

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AL: So let me pause it... Okay we're good. So my next question I'd like to ask everybody because it's a point of contention. Who invented the falafel?

WK: Definitely not, definitely not Israel! [laughs] Honestly, I myself would say probably an old Palestinian man, because it consists of chickpeas and a bunch of, you know, Arabic spices that's better known to Arabs. However, you have the Greek falafel you have the American hush puppies, which is very similar to falafel, fried beans. But it's definitely, definitely an Arab, and I would say most likely, it's the oldest the oldest dish you can every think of, just fried chickpeas, probably a man couldn't afford meat so he decided let's grind some chickpeas and maybe some fava beans and fry it.

AL: I love falafel!

WK: Oh God! You know I'm going to save you a sandwich with Lana sometime because I make a mean falafel sandwich.

AL: Oh that's good. What was I going to ask you about falafel? Oh so I had so when I went to Dana's [El Kurd] house her step mom was cooking breakfast. I had breakfast over there one day, and she was making everything, the hummus, the falafel mix, foul everything, she was doing it all. But Dana's dad fried the falafel. Is that something that men traditionally do? Do they fry the falafel?

WK: Well usually it's a man. If you've been to a restaurant in Jordan or even a household it's usually the man. Because falafel, you are frying in deep oil, hot oil, and that's why I said probably an old, you know, an Arab guy, not a lady because women have always been taking care of the, true, granted, the heavy stuff in the kitchen, but not when it comes to oil and it's requires a certain skill with that molding, you know device so it's usually the man who does that.

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AL: Okay.

WK: But in my house my husband is not allowed in the kitchen when I'm doing the falafel, yeah.

AL: You're the falafel boss?

WK: I'm the kitchen boss!

AL: Yeah so are there any other dishes that are traditionally made by men?

WK: Yes, when you do hash-nash, which is barbeque.

AL: Hash-nash, interesting I had a theory that if there was a dish made by men that it would be a barbeque dish.

WK: yeah it's a hash-nash. We call it hash-nash. Why you have a, we have kind of like a straw plate made out of straws or a certain you know how those stands the old ladies.

AL: The paper...

WK: The paper whatever. They have one specially made, sometimes it's from feathers sometimes it's from straws, where you have to keep the charcoal you know going and blazing. That's why the men has to you know fan the charcoal. This certain movement they call it hash-nash [makes a fanning motion] So, that specific dish it doesn't matter how good of a cook the woman is, it's the man's responsibility. Anything, let me put it this way, anything that might involve hazard to the lady, a man usually takes charge of. Frying a falafel, hash-nash, which is the Arabic barbeque usually its lamb chops or kifta kabobs, chicken cubes kabobs, it's the man's responsibility. It's not our responsibility.

AL: I feel like that's the same everywhere. If you think about in the U.S. it's always the men out on the grill.

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WK: Yes!

AL: But you think you are saving time, because “Oh the man’s grilling we’ll have the barbeque” except the women are still doing all the work in the kitchen. Still serving, still cleaning up! So I had a question. I interviewed somebody and she was telling me that she had issues finding a healthy way of eating because she came from an Arab family and it’s always food, food.

WK: I agree with her.

AL: It was like... you know pushed on her a lot. But then she always felt the pressure that she had to be thin and beautiful to get married.

WK: You can’t have it both ways!

AL: Exactly.

WK: When you are an Arab, you can’t have it both ways to be honest with you, because food is, for us, food is the axis of our life. Our entire lives revolve around it. If you come into my house, and you just walking by and you say, “Oh okay I just want to go by and say hello” and if you are in my house, the Arabic way, the traditional Arabic way, you have to eat. If you refuse to eat, that’s, I would take that as an insult you refusing to eat in my house. It’s the Arabic hospitality. We are known, we’ve been known for it for centuries. Besides if you look at, you know, even here in the U.S., even back home, irregardless [sic] of who you are the kitchen has always been the focal house of any society, any gathering. Cooking, chatting, and drinking if you want to drink orange juice or if you want to drink vodka doesn’t matter. Where you do it? You do it in the kitchen. So it’s really hard to say, you know, you have, you know you are an Arab and you have to be thin. We don’t believe you know in that. Our food is very rich. It’s

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not that healthy. We have some healthy dishes. Don't get me, you know, wrong we have some healthy dishes but then general food, the general Arabic food all in total is not healthy. We use a lot of oil, olive oil, shortening. Definitely a lot of meats, red meats, so it's rich food! It's rich food, and like I said our entire lives revolve around food. If someone comes in, even if they are not invited for lunch, you have to cook them lunch! That's the Arabic hospitality. If someone walks by your house you have to offer them something to eat. Even if you don't have something in your house already made. You have to get up and do something, and you must insist on them staying for a meal. Even if it's between dinner and lunch you are staying, that's it. You are in our house. You have to eat. That's a way, that's our way of showing you our respect and you're eating our food that's your suprecating [sic] that respect to us. See? That's why when we say, even when I have people come over I tell them, "Oh okay I would like you to come over for a cup of coffee." Last Tuesday I had a few friends over. I had about 23 women over for a cup of coffee. But it wasn't just a cup of coffee. We had stuffed grape leaves. I had, I made a roast beef. I made roasted chicken. I made stuffed potatoes. I made an eggplant dish. I made a salad. I had this whole island filled with food. I made some type of dessert it's kind of like knafeh but it's filo stuffed with custard mix.

AL: Yum!

WK: Yep! And I made some chocolate balls, you know, I'm telling them to come for a cup of coffee. But they didn't expect me to serve them just a cup of coffee. That's an insult to me and if they think that I'm just going to serve them that, that thing is insulting me, and thinking so little of me. So if you are an Arab, there's no way you can be thin. There is no way you can be thin!

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AL: Yeah.

WK: I wonder how the Italians do it? All their food is carbs!

AL: It's the same way! Italians are the same way!

WK: Yeah.

AL: Do you think that's harder for girls that grow up in Arab homes, but in the U.S. because we have all those you know horrible images of these really thin models and you feel that sort of, Okay so I don't know maybe or like maybe you said, it doesn't matter because they have to eat?

WK: Granted all those images portrayed in the media all over billboards, magazines, I'm, even, you know, if my daughter is not thin or is not, you know, stick or is not exactly like that models that you see on like I said in the magazines that's okay. That's really okay. It doesn't matter. And if you think that because you are overweight or you are not a certain size and your not gonna [sic] get married. If he's not willing, if that guy is not willing to take you for who you are then he is not worthy of you.

AL: It's a good point.

WK: He's not worthy of you, honestly! Well, what I was going to say but lately I've noticed that you know thin is no more in. Thank God for Kim Kardashian! [laughs]

AL: That's true! [laughs]

WK: Yes! But again, you know the images that, you know, that you see or the model image, you know the stick thin image, no.

AL: It's so bad!

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WK: It is bad. It's unfortunate really. But yeah I think a lot of girls are really wising up and smarter than just to fall into that trap to fall into that propaganda because it's just, you know it's capitalism at its best. They want to sell products.

AL: Exactly.

WK: And that's what they are selling. It's just a product being sold and our girls, thankfully, much smarter than that. And if some guy or some man would criticize her I would just tell her tell him, "Hey I'm Arab, I'm big boned." Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it.

AL: Good! That's refreshing to hear. I have a question I don't know if you would really know. But maybe how did the situation inside Palestine affect food?

WK: Well for the most part they claiming that falafel is Israeli now and that's really, no that's, that's messed up, like my son would say. Well the situation in Palestine to be honest with you, you know a lot of non-Palestinian activists who are pro-Palestine you know from Europe, from the states, from all over the world travel to Palestine and I'm sure during their traveling time at some point they ate some Palestinian food. Let's say one out of 10 liked the dish and took it back home with him and introduced that dish to his culture, to his people. "Oh that's Palestinian dish." So in a way he kind of, like introduced that part of the world to our food. And I'm sure a lot of people who are pro-Palestinian or pro the Palestinian cause let's say, brought some of their foods with them over there. And they introduced to the Palestinian society and the Palestinian culture to a brand new dish or a different kind of food or maybe a different kind of spice. So there probably you could say a little bit of upgrading must have happened at one point.

Whether inside or outside, there had been some kind of exchange on a small scale, you

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know, a small food scale in dishes, and probably recipes, and in spices like I said that, this could happen.

AL: Okay so my next question we talked a little bit about earlier but the Palestinian Festival, what did you think of the food that they served? Was it sort of authentically Palestinian?

WK: No.

AL: No.

WK: Shawarma isn't Palestinian.

AL: It's not?

WK: No.

AL: Where is it from?

WK: It's from Jordan actually, actually it's Turkish.

AL: The Ottoman Empire I guess right?

WK: Yes.

AL: That's probably how it came to the region?

WK: I'm not sure but it's not Palestinian, shawarma. We are more towards, anything that you use rocks to cook with, like the lentil, they use rock, two pieces of rock to crush it and split the actual bean into two parts, that's Palestinian. But shawarma is not. I don't think it is Palestinian. It is, it is, you know available in Palestine, they do it, but it's not Palestinian, I don't think it is actually. I honestly don't think it is, but falafal is.

AL: What other types of food did they have there? So was there more like American-ized or? Or do you think it's just sort of different Arab cultures?

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WK: Different Arab cultures, well barbecue they had you know barbecue there, chicken kabobs, all of that. That is general Arabic food, barbecue. They have the Palestinian dish, which is kind of like stew, where they have the small pieces of lamb in it, potatoes, peas, carrots with tomato sauce, and garlic. That's a Palestinian dish. But the food there was not entirely Palestinian. I mean, you are in a festival and it is more, a fast food idea would serve better than serving maktouba, which is an authentic Palestinian dish or serving maftoul, which is another Palestinian dish or serving fasoulia, which is green beans stew, also a Palestinian dish. But to accommodate the event, to accommodate the environment there, they can't serve that. I hear that. They had I think they also had manakeesh, which is you know the pastry

AL: Yeah.

WK: The oregano pastry. But the actual Palestinian manaqeesh is made with green oreganos which a lot of Palestinian people...

AL: Like za'atar?

WK: Za'atar they plant in their yard and they pick it out and they treat it with some spices, olive oil, and they do the manakeesh, but the za'atar they made over there is different I guess. But I didn't taste it, but they told me they had, you know they were selling the spinach pies and all of that. But the food, the actual food was not authentic Palestinian.

AL: Yeah. So have you been to any Palestinian restaurants in Houston?

WK: There was a restaurant, it is, oh my God I forget what it is called. It is on Harwin and Hillcroft it's a buffet and it served good Palestinian food. Yes, they had the lamb shanks they were done in kind of like a lamb stock and then broiled in the oven. They had

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maklouba, they had cauliflower dish. That was the closest restaurant I've been there, that served Palestinian food yes but so far no. Most they resort now to calling them Mediterranean Restaurants, which means...

AL: Do you plan to teach your children how to make Palestinian food?

WK: Yes!

AL: That was a quick answer.

WK: Lana and Dina already cook a little bit of Palestinian food, and Lana is always bugging me, "You have to teach me how to cook." My problem is I'm kind of territorial in the kitchen. I don't like anybody to be with me, but definitely. I want them to learn and I want them to teach their children, and I want their children to teach their children. It's more of a legacy to us. I mean when you think of it we are, we are people who lost almost everything. And this is what is left so far for us. We cannot let anybody take it away from us. You know, we lost our homes, we lost our land, our home. We lost our olive trees, our grapevines, we lost *everything*. The only thing that we took with us and we will take with us to the grave is our Palestinian food. That is our identity. It's like saying hamburgers are Turkish or hamburgers are Indian food, they are not Americans. Rock and Roll is Paki music, it's not American, you can't do that. You cannot do that. Just like dabkeh is a Palestinian dance our food is a Palestinian food and will always remain that way. They can play with it as they want. They can change with it whatever they want, but they have to understand that this, once they learn a dish the basic way it's done the Palestinian that was originally done, that is what they have to, you know, to hold on to, to keep with them for as long as they live, and to teach their children also for as long as they live definitely. It's not, it is not just a matter of food. It is, like I said, it's a

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fight to the finish and it's our identity, it is our life, and we are not going to give it up that easily.

AL: That was actually my next question was going to be, do you think there is a way to maintain your identity and you sort of already answered that.

WK: Yeah, well through food, through our attire or wardrobe, through our teachings for our children. Like I said, we have to instill in them our Palestinian values, our Arabic values regardless of religion (of course as long as it does not conflict with our religion).

That is, you know that is indisputable. I really appreciate that they live here in this great country. With regardless of what the government, you know, does or who it supports or the fact that it's lopsided support to Israel somewhat affects us, but something good came out of it. We came here and being here give us the freedom to teach our children and to speak to them freely and without, you know, interference from anybody and to instill in them also our values, our cultural, you know, essence. We are here given an opportunity to, you know, keep going with our lives as Palestinian than anywhere else in the world.

They go to Palestinian Festivals, they go to protests. They go to Palestinian film festivals. We can do this here in this country. We cannot do it anywhere else in the world, and that is honestly is the greatest gift we can ever have, until we go back to our land.

That is our second home here. It's the only home that we have here, until you know, God willing, we go back to where we are originally from, to our home. Absolutely, we will keep going on. We will continue definitely.

AL: Okay well thank you. Did you have anything else you wanted to add? Those were all the questions that I wrote down?

WK: Not really I really appreciate you giving me the opportunity to talk to you.

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AL: Thank you so much.

WK: I love talking to you and I can tell from your questions that you are a very bright woman.

AL: Thank you so much.

WK: I wish you great luck.

AL: Thank you.

WK: Insha'Allah as we say, God willing.

AL: Thank you so much.

WK: I hope you enjoyed your eggplant.

AL: I did! Thank you so much!

WK: You're welcome.

End of interview.