Anita Jaisinghani Oral History
Interviewer: James Wall
Place: Houston, TX
Date: 17 November 2010

WALL: And, we are recording now. This is James Wall; it is November 17, 2010. I'm speaking with Anita Jaisinghani, Owner/Operator of Indika Restaurant in Montrose. Ok, if you can start with kind of, where you were born, your early childhood, and tell us what that was like, and things like that…

JAISINGHANI: [Groans]

WALL: I know…

JAISINGHANI: Ok, this is down memory lane, huh?

WALL: Yeah, we'll start from the beginning.

JAISINGHANI: Ok. I was born in this little state called [] which is in Western India. I wasn't there very long, so I don't have many memories of it. But we moved around a lot, my father had worked for the local state government so it meant he was moved around within the state and we moved around different cities in Gujarat. So I lived all over Gujarat, I ended up in Ahmedabad and Baroda, two cities that are quite major in…
WALL: Can you spell those?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, A-h-m-e-d-a-b-a-d. And Baroda: B-a-r-o-d-a. I did my high school and my college in between those two cities. I was there until I was about twenty and then I got married and headed to North America. But my growing up years were mostly in schools, I went to English schools, schools that were run by, mostly by either Italian or European nuns, or…they were Christian schools, all my life I went to Christian schools till I graduated. I spent my summers mostly in Mumbai enjoying–I had a good friend that had a big house there by the beach so we spent lots of time there. Otherwise it was–I mean, I had a wonderful childhood, so all I can say is I had–you know it's only when you get to the age where I am that you can reflect on how great your childhood was. At the time it was like what everybody else did or had, it wasn't a big deal, but it is.

WALL: I see. And what were your parents like?

JAISINGHANI: They were from–my parents were from a state called Sindh, I think I've mentioned that to you, which is now in Pakistan. At the time they had migrated from Sindh to–my father went to Pune, which is near Mumbai and my mother went to the South, in Chennai, actually, and then when they got married they started living in Gujarat, because my father got a job with the state government. But they both were–my father had a degree in government policy or something like that from the University of Pune. They were both just really nice, normal people. My mother was probably my most inspiring out of the two. She was very strong willed;

she was 4'11" but a real firecracker. Everybody in the neighborhood or the family knew her; she was one to reckon [with]. She could walk into a room and stand tall even though she was little because she had a real voice and she had a real presence about her. And she was not someone you ever wanted to cross paths with because she would just bulldoze you. She was something– when she turned 40 she decided she wanted to paint and she went to school with a bunch of young kids to a really good art school in the town we were living in and did a one year, kind of fast track, degree in art–in how to paint. And she taught us how to paint, and she did several paintings, and did shows. And she was in college with like kids in their twenties, and they would all call her "Auntie," and so I remember that, so…

WALL: Can you talk about your earliest memories of food and how you kind of got into this love of food–where does this come from?

JAISINGHANI: You know, food was always a big part of–I think it's a big part of most Indian families. I don't think we were that unique because my mother–because we were North Indians and we were living in a different state in India. And Gujarat, where I grew up–it's mostly vegetarian, a lot of Janes live there, so they eat uh–do you know how the Janes eat, right? They don't eat anything that's above–that's below ground and they're super vegetarians and they're vegans. So we didn't eat much of the local food. My mother was–being from Sindh, liked to eat, you know, meats and fish, and so we ate–unlike our neighbors and our friends–we ate very well. We ate, um–I mean, food was a big part of–and we, most of my friends in Gujarat would eat the kind of food that I never got to eat at home, so I would–whenever I got a chance to go to their houses it was a treat to eat like a thali at a Gujarati person's house and some of my best memories are of thalis in friend's houses in Gujarat. So that started really young, and she [Anita's Mom] was a good cook, a really good cook. So she fell ill when I was about 13, and she had to be in bed rest for about a year and I decided I had to enter the kitchen because we had a cook in the house but all he would ever do is prep. So I ended up cooking for about a year, or just helping out in the kitchen enough to learn, and then when she got better she went back to the kitchen and I got kicked out. Because my brothers told me that–well my dad told me that I was spending way too much money on food. I was buying all the–I was making really elaborate food in those days. I would make like traditional Mughlai-style food, heavily sauced and spiced and I was buying nuts by the like–by the crate and he [Anita's Dad] was like, "Alright our food bills have tripled since you've took over the kitchen." But my brothers–I have two older brothers– they thought it was just great. But I got kicked out and I went back to cooking a few years later. So, that's really where my food began–that I learned how to cook, I taught myself how to cook then, so…

WALL: I read somewhere that you were influenced by Julia Child. Is that true?

JAISINGHANI: Oh yeah, absolutely, in fact, you know it's interesting how there's layers to learning. And when I first came to the U.S., I could cook but I could not bake. I mean, I had never, we had a little gas oven in our house. My mother would bake a cake like once a month, and it was the most wonderful–it's one of my best memories of the cake, it was a plain vanilla cake she made from scratch from like wonderful eggs with great ingredients…and Indians don't do much baking. Now there's a lot of bakeries in India but in those days baking wasn't a big

deal. But when I came here I taught myself how to cook and Julia Child was–her book, *Baking With Julia*, was my first bible of baking. So yeah, I learned a lot of my baking just by reading her books and I didn't go to school for that, so teaching myself how to bake.

WALL: I see. Let's see, you went for Microbiology in college, why microbiology? Of all things to major in?

JAISINGHANI: You know, honestly I don't even have a good answer for why I did microbiology. It was–convenient? Is that a terrible answer?

AJNA [Anita's Daughter]: No.

JAISINGHANI: But it really was, it was just convenient. I mean, when you–the thing is, I wanted to go to medical school at the time and you had to get an undergrad to do medical school. And the medical school was just something to really get away from my parents at the time, because there's really good medical schools in like a town that was right next to Ahmedabad, and it was like three hours–like Austin and Houston is–and it was a real college town, it was called Baroda, and I wanted to go to medical school there. So I thought let me do an undergrad in something in science and Biology sounded too intimidating so Microbiology sounded–when I looked at the disciplines it sounded interesting–that I could enjoy it, so I did and it was cool. The first three years I spent way too much time outside of school, you know, having way too much fun but the third year I got back into my grades and graduated at the top of my class, so it was ok, so…

WALL: So you graduate, and then what?

JAISINGHANI: So then I just joined my–I started a master's degree and I had actually applied to the medical school and applied to a master's degree in the town I was living in, which was Ahmedabad, and I met my future husband.

WALL: Can you spell that last name–of the town?

JAISINGHANI: Oh, Ahmedabad? The same one that I mentioned earlier?
WALL: Oh yeah, ok, right.

JAISINGHANI: That was the town that I went to college in, so…I met him in Delhi though, he had come in from–he was living in Canada and he had come for a visit so I met him when he came by and two weeks later I was married.

WALL: Two weeks? Why so quickly?

JAISINGHANI: Well in those days it seemed like–I don't know it's–these are questions that I honestly have no real answers for. But it was the norm, you know, when you live in a culture where you've had a great life and you kind of do what is expected of you–I mean, I didn't even know what marriage was when I got into it. My parents had a beautiful marriage and they were

the happiest people I knew, so when they told me to get married, I thought, "Ok, I guess that's what I'll do." I really hadn't–it just–it was–it was too early and I just didn't know what I was doing but I did get married at age 20. So, and, um, I came to Canada right after–a few months after, so…

WALL: Ok, umm, so where did you move to in Canada?

JAISINGHANI: Edmonton, Canada: unfit for human living, I'll tell you. And I didn't even know what a snowflake looked like–I mean when you're living in New Delhi and Mumbai, it's like, "What the hell is cold weather?" Putting on a jacket is as cold as it gets. I arrived on August 12 of 1982. I was married in '81, in '82, I had just turned 21. And I came, and it was great for the first month, and then September–the snow didn't go away until like May of the following year, so…it was pretty scary. And I think I liked snow for about a week, and then for the next ten years, I hated it.

WALL: But in terms of, uh, anything besides the weather, what was it like adjusting?

JAISINGHANI: Oh yeah, it was a huge culture shock and honestly, in the beginning, it's like, it's pretty amazing because if you've lived in a country like India which is so packed with people and energy, to come out to a cold, distant land is like–it's almost like you're on another planet, that's how it feels. And it really wasn't–I think I was like shell-shocked for a few years. I used to go–just going into a grocery store–I could not–I just had to be dragged out of there because I could just sit there and stare at the vegetables, because they looked like sculpture to me. And you know, vegetables and I–we'll get to that in a little bit, but–so much of that was just beautifully arranged supermarkets and pristinely laid out stores. It was a pretty crazy visual and I would–I certainly enjoyed my first part, and I thought India was just like–"Oh god I'm not going back to India," like "I am done with that." But within a year I was back and it just-it's funny how it all comes back to you, but um, now I can compare both cultures and have a better perspective.

WALL: So, how long were you in Edmonton?

JAISINGHANI: Four years.

WALL: And, at this time, what was your husband doing? And what is your husband like?

JAISINGHANI: His name is Ravi. What is he like? He's actually–ok, he was a Ivy Leaguer, one of those top–uhh–there's a school in India called the IIT–it's kind of like the MIT of India but it makes MIT look like it's easy. *60 Minutes* did a two hour special on just that school a few years ago as to how hard it is. Most of the Indians that are successful in the world come from that school and it's crazy to believe that that's true, but so much research has been done on that school that you could look it up, it's the Indian Institute of Technology and there are four branches and he went to one of those on scholarship. He and his brother both went there. He was a chemical engineer working for Exxon at the time, so he just had a really good job and I was–when I got there I tried to continue my master's degree in microbiology in Edmonton. I mean, he was really into food–food always was a big part of our lives and the good thing about him was

that he–and I feel like a lot of how I ended up cooking was because he never–he was not the kind of person that like raved about my food, but he never stopped me from experimenting, so that always made me keep pushing myself to do new things, so I was always experimenting with food the entire time I was being married. It was initially–it was just trying to cook and then it was trying to cook with ingredients that I found there, in Canada. But yeah, I studied–that's where I finished my microbiology and I did some further studies in that.

WALL: So you got your master's?

JAISINGHANI: No, I didn't finish my master's. As I've told you, it's all a lie on print and I've tried to deny that, I've just told them I don't have a master's. I actually did a…

WALL: Or a PhD?

JAISINGHANI: [Laughs] Or a PhD, I actually have a–it's really hilarious I should just be given a PhD from all the years of denying it, you know? But yeah, I don't and I actually did a BTECH or a diploma that I got in medical technology, and I worked with a pathologist. We moved from Edmonton to Toronto for two years. I loved Toronto: great city, great food city. And then from Toronto we moved back to Calgary, where my daughter was born. That's really where I began to get more into food–when my children were born, because I started cooking a lot more at home and feeding them and opening jars and looking at "what is in this jar? And why are my kids eating this?" So my cooking was–I began to be much more of an intense cook then…and from Calgary we moved to–in 1990–so I came here in '82 it was Canada–it was Edmonton to Toronto to Calgary, then Calgary to Boston. He got a job, but then my husband at the time was working for Exxon and then he moved to a company called Petro-Canada. He was one of those people that was really good at what he did so he would get offers all over, and it was up to him what he took. And when they opened up the NAFTA borders, any professional could come from Canada. We were Canadian citizens at the time, so we could come from Canada to the U.S. So he got several offers from California and he took one in Boston with a company called Raytheon, and we moved there. We lived in Cambridge–in Andover, actually–he worked in Cambridge. We lived there for about six months, and he didn't like that company he worked for at all, so he got another job in Houston with ABB-Simcon. Moved here in 1990-October. And my son was born in December 1990. And it's really in the U.S. that my food journey began because for me to go back to working with a doctor like I used to–even in a lab–the American certification required me to go back to school for two years. Having had two kids under three I didn't want to put my kids under daycare, so I stayed home and started a small catering business with a friend. So…

WALL: So at what point did you realize that you wanted to transition from just wanting to cook for people to doing this for a living?

JAISINGHANI: When I couldn't find–really it was more–I used to get angry when I would go to Indian restaurants. I felt like there were days when–in the 80's being Indian wasn't cool, or things Indian weren't cool–now they are. So in those days when people were denying the fact–I always thought Indian food and culture was pretty damn amazing. And even though I was very enthralled by how glossy everything American/Canadian was…I went back to India once a year,

and my mother had extracted a promise from my husband when we married that he would send me back once a year. So he kept that promise, and I would go back once a year. I mean, for the last few years I've travelled back twice a year, and I've really begun to understand why the two cultures are the way they are. But I just wanted to do food that didn't come off a buffet line. Initially it was really that, and not that buffets are bad, but…are you laughing [at her daughter]?

AJNA [DAUGHTER]: No, I like that.

JAISINGHANI: I hate to make it sound like–I'm not–it's a career path for many; it's good to have some Indian food. I always tell my Indians and I–it's something I would not want quoted in a magazine, but even bad Indian food is better than good American food, or better than most American food which mostly comes out of a bag or a box. Even the Indian food out of a buffet line is better to me than most other food. But I know I could do something more and I began to cater with a friend. And actually, there's a little side trip I'll take with my food. When I moved to Houston in 1990, we lived in the suburbs in Houston, and I made two very good friends, one was a American girl, her name was Sharon Benemo at the time, she has a different last name now. She was married to an Arab-Moroccan, and she was from Chicago. What?

AJNA: A Jewish-Moroccan.

JAISINGHANI: A Jewish-Moroccan, that's true. Well anyway, she was from Chicago and they were heavily into food. They would travel–we used to travel too, but when I would talk to her about food–I'd never met anyone that knew as much about food as she did. So we began to–we had kids the same age, our kids went to the same school, they all went to Awty. And then I had a second friend, her name was Carina Wilson, she was a Dutch woman that had travelled to India for about two years in her life, she had just spent backpacking through India. And she knew Indian food and I would–so the three of us would–and all three we carpooled, we were kind of like soccer moms–and I hate to say this but really we were. And we would drive our kids to school from like Never Never Land to Awty, and we would go back and–and we were all snobs with eating out, we never wanted to eat out. We were always either in my kitchen or in someone's kitchen and I was always cooking. And I learned so much from them–and this friend Carina Wilson was a–she was a design queen. I mean, when I walked into her house for the first time, I think in 1991 when I locked myself out of my house–she just–she was amazing with color. She had extracted Indian colors and put them in her house like I had never seen anybody do, I still haven't seen anybody do that. And she was really into food, so the three of us really began to experiment and Sharon and I started the catering business together and we catered for some pretty high end Houston companies. There was a Haliburton executive and a Continental executive that we did all their Christmas parties and their private events for. And it was real small–30-50 people, and we would cook for like three days, then take the food, hire servers to manage it. So I learned a lot from them as far as my food journey went, it really opened my eyes up.

WALL: And when did you start going to UH?

JAISINGHANI: I went with–actually Sharon and I went to UH together. We took–that was in, I think '97-'98? Something like that that I did my–it was either '97 or '98 I went to UH. I did a year of, you know, just classes, and the food classes I didn't learn as much from as I did from the management, because I found those were really effective. I quit that, I did not want to go through the whole, you know, hotel/restaurant management program. I decided to take the plunge and go, but previous to that I had done–or Sharon and I had done was taught a small business and food with Chutney's. We sold sauces–we had three different sauces: cilantro, tamarind, and peach. Huh? (at Ajna) And mint coconut, yeah. Our kids loved it–it's really funny how all four of our kids loved the one that nobody ever wanted to buy, so we discontinued that one. But the business did well, we sold to all the Whole Foods in Texas, in Austin–at that time it was Austin and Houston, I think San Antonio also. We didn't make much money, the money we made was like pocket money, but it was very exciting to do something and not make a loss in it. You know? It was a brand new business and Anne Cruzibel, at the time she was the Houston Chronicle's food editor, she tasted our cilantro schechnie sauce and she put us on the cover of the chronicle in '97-'98? No, probably '99, because I quit that when I…it was the year–it was Minka's birthday that we were on the cover. I have the article up in my attic somewhere. Anyway, so that was my claim to fame with those sauces. They did well but we stopped the company when I started working for Café Annie, then I went on to open Indika. I couldn't handle that, but at the new place I'm opening I'm going to sell fresh sauces, so…I'm really excited about that.

WALL: Interesting. As far as Café Annie, how does that work out? How did you get involved with that?

JAISINGHANI: Well, it was just a–it was a whim. I mean, I hadn't–we were a very conservative family, we didn't eat out much so I had never eaten there. But we–I had made my–I used to read enough to know what were the top restaurants and Café Annie had been consistently at the top in Houston, the restaurant scene, for like a few years, and I had never–I mean, I did not know how to approach them for a job. But I had wrote up a resume and I walked in there and had given a resume to the hostess and she said that "Are you looking for a hostess job?" And I'm like, "no, kitchen," and she was like, "you're kidding me," and I'm like, "yep, kitchen." She asked me three times and I said kitchen each time. She was like, "Okay, I'll give it to the chef and he will call you back." And he called me back the next day, and he was–his name was Ben Berryhill, really nice, he and his wife Mariana, they were running Café Annie at the time–really nice couple that I had a good rapport with–and even though we had a disagreement about Mexican food which I didn't know much about at the time–the interview, it went kind of well and he said, "Okay, why don't you come back tomorrow and spend the day with us and we'll see if we like you and if we do then we'll hire you." Okay, so then I came back the next day and wore the wrong shoes, no socks, didn't have anything right, I didn't know how to dress–it was awful. So I got sent to Walgreen's early in the morning to buy socks. Anyway, so I spent the day there kind of following chefs around, and I kind of felt like an idiot because I did not know what I was doing in a commercial kitchen with these big heavy pans and these big chefs with a lot of machismo and testosterone in that room and here I was trying to like, just stay out of people's way was all I was trying to do and even that was hard enough. Anyway, I spent my time with this fish cook that I think did not give a very good report on me at the end of the day because they told me that, you know, "thank you very much but we don't–we've already found–we don't

think you have the experience to come work for our place, so we will wish you all the best." They were really nice, I have to always–anyways, so then, the next day, the pastry chef from there calls me. Her name was Jamie Martin–she goes, "hey Anita, do you want to come in and do something in pastry?" I'm like, "pastry?" Like, I said, I don't even like pastry. And I do not have a sweet tooth, you can barely get a cookie past me, and I don't eat sweets–in those days I ate almost no sweets. So I'm like, I don't really want to work in pastry. And I didn't say that to her, I said, "Sure, I'll be right there." So I went in to talk to her and she said, "I don't have a position now, but if something opens up, I'd like to hire you in pastry." So I said, "You know, why don't I come in and work for you for free? I'll just come in and spend some time here and I'll learn pastries because I don't really know anything about it. Let me just come in and spend time and when you have a vacancy I'll apply for the job." So they made me sign this disclaimer that I wouldn't sue them if something dropped on my head and I started working one day a week there. And my kids were going to school at the time so my schedule was a little off of theirs. For a month I did this one day a week–I would just go in there and observe and learn and I got yelled at and put in my place a few times, but it was good–it was a great learning experience. And then within a month they had an opening; they offered me a job. So I took the job; they gave me a lot of flexibility in my time. So I worked there for two years and by the second year they figured out that I wasn't there to rise in the company, I was there to learn and get out. And I was very blunt when I walked in there, I said, "I want to work here because I want to open a restaurant." And they all looked at me like, "You're just a mom, you're just a wannabe," which is something I'd been told before by chefs in New York when I had gone to visit, they said, "Oh, well, don't do it. This is a crazy business, you shouldn't get into this business, women don't succeed in this." And it's true, you know who told me that? Floyd from Tabla. Anyways, he just said don't do it, it's too much work, it's too difficult. So anyway, obviously I didn't listen to them. I quit Café Annie in 2000 and opened in 2001 with–the financial support all came from my husband at the time, and my–a lot of emotional support came from Café Annie, because they gave me that push that I needed. I did not have the confidence to do what I did without having worked for them and cooked for them and having been given the–kind of the blessings to do it. When someone in the business tells you "you should open up a restaurant," it's a pretty damn good feeling. So, that's really what happened–they told me, "okay, you should open a restaurant and we'll help you." And they did, they did my wine list, they helped me hire people, they just helped me a lot at the beginning.

WALL: And that was your first, like, real restaurant job?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, exactly, well it was my real–basically I jumped in head first, so I had to either swim or I had to basically sink. I couldn't float in that place, it was a do everything or do nothing kind of thing. From day one it was–I was there from–I think when we opened I used to go there at–when the kids would take off for school I would drop them at school around 7, I'd go straight to the restaurant and not come back until the kids got back which was around 3. And I would have dinner with them and I'd go right back at 5:30 or so, then I would stay till about 11. That was my–every day for five days–we were closed Sundays and Mondays so I got a break. I was there for five days doing those hours for about five years.

WALL: Interesting. And how long before Café Annie did you settle on the idea that you're going to open a restaurant?

JAISINGHANI: I had decided that before I went in to work for them. I knew I wanted to open a restaurant even when I was doing the caterings and–I mean, that had been a hankering that I had had for a while, that "I think I want to open a restaurant." And I mean, I don't think I had–there was nothing–cooking gave me an outlet that nothing else ever did. And I think that's really why I opened Indika–it wasn't really to–it was–I could lose myself in my food–like, it gave me a creativity–it gave me room to be creative where nothing else gave me the satisfaction–I could hide behind my food. And that's really what I did is–cooking was like–I could forget about everything else and just cook and it came easy to me. I was very instinctive with my spices. I had watched–I had played around enough to know that I could make it work. So…you know, opening–when I opened Indika the menu that I did was–something that–I wasn't trying to be like anybody else and I wasn't trying to go on anyone's path. So it was very scary to do a menu that people don't recognize as Indian food and they think, "Well, what the hell is this?" Like, "Why don't I see sapani and tandoori chicken on the menu?" Because that's all we know as Indian food and so it was–and it didn't really hit me until the night before we opened but I went into a–I think a two hour crying binge and I thought, "Okay, that's it, they're all going to walk in tomorrow and throw tomatoes at me and say this is the shittiest food they've ever had, and I'm going to be out in a year and nothing was going to happen." I mean, I went through like so many nightmares in that first week of opening–really, really scary.

WALL: What was your first day like?

JAISINGHANI: We had one customer. And I just remember the name–Pappas–Lynn Pappas, her name was, Lynn and Scott, I remember his name. They're really sweet, they used to live in the neighborhood. They said they drove by every day waiting to see the "Now Open" sign–well the day I put the "Now Open" sign. And I was so scared about getting hit hard that I didn't want to announce an opening. I didn't get hit hard–I had one customer. I had a staff of like fifteen people and two people ate at our place for the first–on the first day. But, yeah, we made sure they had a great meal, so…I still remember what they ate, that's so terrible–they ate the halibut, anyway, and the eggplant–two things that were on my menu. So they ate, and that was our first day. And then the second day I think there would be five or ten people. And we opened on a Tuesday–it was July 17, 2001, it was a Tuesday. So the Friday after that first week, my friends at Café Annie, who were, you know, really well meaning, had sent a press release to the press and the Chronicle about my restaurant without even telling me. I think they were just doing this for me, so I got this little article in the paper about, "So-and-so's opened a restaurant" and we suddenly got like a hundred customers, and we just felt like we had been trampled on, run over, because we went from like 10 to 100 in like three days. And that was really–I think half the customers left saying they were never coming back because of how badly we handled it. But that was just the beginning, and then it all got better after that. So we went through our opening pains…

WALL: How long did it take to come out of the opening…

JAISINGHANI: The opening pains? About a year, because the crew–the first year was the hardest, I think I learned my biggest lessons then. I was so frantic about every molecule of food that would leave my kitchen that I would stand there like a complete–I mean, I was, and I was– a neurotic bitch. I was–because to me, every piece of food coming out of there was a little piece of me going out, and if it wasn't perfect, it wasn't going to leave the kitchen. And I couldn't handle–I had this friend of mine, Sharon, that I talked about earlier–she and I were going to be partners in this. And she didn't have a financial stake in the company but she and I had like done all the planning and everything together, so she said she would handle the front of the house and I would handle the back of the house. So I thought I had my work cut out for me–well, within three days of opening we had a huge fight, and we didn't talk for five years. So we basically–I suddenly took on 100% of the responsibility as opposed to maybe 60 or 70. So I had nobody up front and I had nobody in the back, I had to do both jobs, and that's what became really challenging. I had to watch the customers and I had to watch the food, and I just somehow managed to do both, you know, with some level of stress and um…So the first year was really hard because–because of my being really neurotic I was angry and I would express it on people, I ended up losing staff–people quit on me and I think we had like almost an 80 person turnover in the first like six months where we were just chaotic, chaotic and out of control. Well that was really more the first two months, and then 9/11 happened within two months of our opening, and everything just went dead. But luckily we just got so much press from September 2000 to 9/11 to the February-March after that. In those six months we got just huge–from *Gourmet Magazine* to the *New York Times* to the *Chronicle* to the *Houston Press* that–that's what kept bringing people in, otherwise we would've gone out of business. We were in this obscure location behind a building and–nearly impossible to find if you didn't know what you were looking for. So, that's really…oh go ahead.

WALL: Oh, I was going to ask–at what point did you finally relax? Or realize that it was going to be ok?

JAISINGHANI: I think for the first five years I didn't relax, because every year–in the first month I was so out of wack with what I needed to do–I think we lost like 20,000 dollars just like that because I didn't know what I was doing. I had no idea how to order, how to, you know, manage my food costs, and it was just–and I learned really fast how to manage my staff, manage my–what comes in and what goes out. Within the second or third month we began to break even. I knew we would survive, you know, I knew we would last after the first three years, four years. I was like, "Okay, I think this is going to work." But I never relaxed really until now…now I'm in a very good place at Indika. I can really appreciate what has happened in the last ten years–it's going to be ten years next year. So…

WALL: The move from Memorial to Montrose, can you talk about that?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, that was in 2006. There was–you know, there was a little traumatic because we bought the building and did the construction–and construction I think I realized that no matter when and how you do it, construction is traumatic. I feel sorry for contractors, they must have, just ulcers from what they do, because it's hard–construction is hard. So yeah, we opened in Montrose in 2006, April the 7th. And it was a really good move overall, in the

beginning it was a little shaky because we didn't really–it's kind of silly–but I don't think we really realized that Montrose was–what Montrose was until we actually arrived in Montrose. And then we're like, "Oh, this is Montrose! Okay I think we like Montrose!" And I ended up buying a house–you know, I live in Montrose now so obviously I love the neighborhood, but we didn't really know what we were getting into at the time. So, it was an eye opener and luckily we–and what's really funny is when we were in Memorial we got written up as–there's a magazine called *Passport*, it's a gay magazine, they give–we were in the "Top Ten Gay Friendly Restaurants in the World." And I'm like, "how the hell did we get that?" And I just–I called up the editor and I'm like–and I never call editors and ask–but I'm like, "tell me why," I said, "I'm so flattered to be on this list, but what did it?" And I remember we had a–and I have to tell you this because it's so interesting–we had a gay waiter at the time, his name was Guido. He was this beautiful Costa Rican boy that walked in trying to sell me desserts and we're like, "you're really cute, you should work as a waiter here." So the next thing you knew he quit his selling desserts job and became a waiter for us, and he–and you know sometimes we'd get the occasional gay-phobic customer–a couple of them walked in one time and they told us that they did not want him to wait on them, and I pretty much kicked them out. Because I just–I couldn't, and he was the only one that could wait on them, I'm like, "well, either you let him wait on you or leave," and they left. So I think that kind of–that story–either someone knew that story or knew something happened with that. And we were–to us, a customer was a customer, it didn't matter if they were black, blue, purple, or gay. We took care of everybody the same, and that was a premise I had based the business on–that no matter who–whether it's even a family with a child, or a bunch of children, as long as they don't make any noise they can eat here. Of course they can be asked to take the kid outside, but that's all we ever did, you know? Anyways, so being in the middle of "Gaytown" we were perfectly happy and excited, you know, so…Montrose has really been good, no regrets about being here. I think the neighborhood at first was a little scary, but before we actually opened, my next-door neighbor, Marco Wiles–he used to live by where I lived and we used to kind of walk or bike on the same path and–we were about a few months away from opening and he once walked up behind me and said, "hey Anita, I have news for you–I'm your new neighbor." I'm like, "you are? What are you going to do?" He goes, "I'm opening a pizzeria right next to you," he goes, "you're there, I feel good about you opening Indika there." I'm like, "how wonderful," because there was a Moroccan place next to–would have been a Moroccan place–Marrakesh. So, he took over that and he opened Dolce Vita, which was great having that as a neighbor. So yeah, we were very happy to be in Montrose.

WALL: Whose idea was it initially to make the move?

JAISINGHANI: It was both my husband and me–we got divorced in the interim–in 2003 we were divorced, so we agreed that we would continue to run the business as we owned it, and we did. I mean, we agreed for the most part–I mean, he never interfered with the food which was something that–I don't think had he been the interfering kind, or trying to make me cut costs or change things, I would have definitely not cooked the way I did. He gave me free reins. We weren't trying to make the restaurant like, "okay, how were our profits this month?" We were just–if we could pay everybody–I paid myself a small salary–if I could do that, I was happy. It was not about–it was never about profitability. It wasn't–Indika has never been about that, it's always been about the food, so…and he loves food enough that he would not want me to

compromise the quality of the food in any way. So he never says, "oh I think you should buy cheaper quality milk or chicken," he just completely left that up to me. So that–in that sense I was very blessed because I know a lot of chefs have to report back to their, you know, their bosses or their owners to keep food costs–I mean I have good instinct with money, so I was able to keep things within a certain–you know, within industry standards. That wasn't what was driving me. So, the move is probably more his idea than mine, and there was a reason–because we were renting that place in Memorial and our landlord was not a very nice man. He would not let us park and–there were a lot of issues with that building. So we're like, "ok, it's time to leave, and let's move on to something better." I wanted to be at the time–my dream location was Kirby. I had this Kirby obsession for like the last twenty years. I'm so happy I'm going to end up on Kirby, because even when we were opening the original Indika, we had talked to the guy that owned this center at Sunset and Kirby where Azuma is now. I mean I was at this signing table with the owner of that property back in 2000, and they just weren't very nice. I mean, they didn't think I–they looked–I kind of always got the cold shoulder from landlords because I was just this housewife, essentially, that was doing a part-time job at Café Annie that was looking for–and they would all kind of roll their eyes at me and say, "do you really know what you're getting into?" And I would–I believed in myself so much that I wouldn't let these people get to me, but they just didn't see in me what I guess I was seeing in myself, it was really discouraging. Anyway, so that didn't pan out. The whole thing with Kirby was dropped, and then we, one day I was just walking in Memorial and I found the Memorial location. So we ended up being, you know, signing that lease. So uh…I'm sorry what was I talking about? [Laughs] I lost track.

WALL: Uh, the move to Montrose.

JAISINGHANI: The move to Montrose, yeah. So, it's interesting, oh yeah, that we moved. I wanted to rent a space, but being an old fashioned Indian that Ravi is, he wanted to just buy property. He was like, "why should we rent when we can buy?" And he always had lots of money, so he found–this was the closest piece of land on Westheimer that we could actually buy. Most–it's very hard to get land on Westheimer or on Kirby–most of it is already owned by–you have to buy like blocks of land. So this was really the first piece that came along that he could buy, so he jumped on it. And we bought it actually–he bought it, rather, back in 2004-2003, and we didn't actually open until 2006, so…that's why we came this far east. We probably would have been closer to 610 had we not had to buy, but anyways. So that's really how we ended up in Montrose.

WALL: When you move to Montrose that seems like when things really start to take off.

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, things did take off then and we got–it became more of a mainstream–it wasn't a suburban little location, a little off the wall place, it was more–we were in with the big players, kind of, we had to hold our own. We weren't–we were competing with, you know, restaurants like Da Marco's and Mark's and all the big restaurants on our street. And I never had any fear of that, like I never thought that I couldn't compete with them [Anita's phone starts ringing] Excuse me. I was always–I mean I've always had tunnel vision with food. I don't–I'm not one of those that sits and checks out other people's menus and goes online and checks websites. I almost never do that. So I–my food has evolved over the years on my own just from

learning more about it, cooking more, playing with food more, and getting into the whole food movement–that really began more in the last five years with me.

WALL: And how did you handle the press?

JAISINGHANI: You know we never had any–for us, "press" was when someone would call us. Or, what was really funny was, half the times it was like, we were the last to know that we were written up. Because they didn't call us and ask us for permission, like unless, "I'm coming to take a picture," which is when they would call and we'd be like, "oh, I wonder what he's going to write about us?" We never knew because we never had a press agent, we never had a public relations company or…nothing. We have spent, in Indika, zero dollars on PR or advertisement or anything at all. And no one believed us, and I don't think people still–I think people in the PR business know because they've all tried to get us to do PR with them. And my answer is usually, "well, I'm going to put my dish on my plate and not on you because I want my food to talk for itself." And it did, it really did–it's I think what brought us the press was the food.

WALL: In terms of–because a lot of the praise comes from your food being unique–how does that work out with, like other Indian restaurants in the area? Or have you gotten flack for that? Or how has the reaction been from other Indian restaurateurs?

JAISINGHANI: You know, honestly, I don't–I lead such a–I live in my own bubble. I go to Hillcroft some times and I'll eat at a dosa place and I love a good dosa, but aside from that–I mean, Mickey Kapur, he owns Khyber on Kirby and Richmond–he's a good friend that helps me when I run into a problem, you know, if I need something in town. Otherwise, no, I think the Indian community is–is just like any other community. I think they–everybody's competitive. I was only competing with myself, I had to put my personal best out there, I wasn't trying to up anybody. Even when I went to New York and I was trying out restaurants there, I came back saying, "I know what I don't want to do in my life. I know how I don't want my food to be." So just by eliminating a lot I was able to focus on how I wanted my food to be. I was very clear in what I wanted to do. I mean, I was–it had many iterations–I think my food evolved with me, and it still does.

WALL: When did you start this sort of–commitment to organic beef and organic food?

JAISINGHANI: Ok that's–I sound like I'm really ignorant when I say this and I think I've told you this when we met, but I didn't really understand organic until about–well I was shopping in Whole Foods because it felt right to do that, and organic seemed like the right thing to do. But when I really began to read about it–when we sold our Chutney's to Whole Foods, I began to shop there. And I didn't really believe it. Organic was nice, I kind of knew what organic was. I was a believer in "buy organic if you could," and at the time, organic was so much more pricier than conventional that at the restaurant it was almost impossible. And there were no organic–I mean, we didn't have farmer's markets ten years ago or even eight years ago. So if they were there they were so small and you really couldn't do much. So I wasn't into that as much as I was–as I have been in the last five or six years. And I think it's–to me, it's the animals that get to

me more than the food. Yeah, I think chemicals are bad and I think pesticides are bad, but when I see the way–did you read it, by the way?

WALL: Mmhm, it's very good. Johnathan Safran Foer's…uh, *Eating Animals*?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So when I began to read about animals, I realized that, "okay, I have to do something." And it wasn't just about buying organic. And–buying organic–the other thing is when I started to understand organic, I began to read a lot, and to me organic is like a four-letter word. Because organic has become just a–there's no–the rules for organic are not clear-cut. I think the FDA is so messed up. There's such a terrible issue between drugs and food in America. I mean, the FDA…has destroyed the food industry here, and the drug industry, and eventually people, because people become dependent on food and drugs. And they eat all the wrong foods, because the FDA does what's good for them, and then they make them take all these drugs to make them better. And it's like a completely fucked up relationship that has messed up people's health. You know, and I think it's not that people meant to be that way, it became like–it almost–it made you–it was impossible to not be that way, and I think the awareness for that obviously is at its highest now. But I–commitment to green was–I mean I wasn't as much of a believer until I got into the animals, and that just really shook me up. And that happened a few years ago. Michael Pollan was my first–I read his book when he first came out and I kind of–I think I went and bought ten copies and I gave them to all my friends and I'm like, "read this book and pass it on." And then I met this woman from Rice University who wrote this book called *The Unhealthy Truth*–Robin-something–amazing book. And then I, you know, read the Jonathan Safran Foer book, and that was recently. And that's what made me–I think when I read his book–till then I always felt guilty, I felt like, "Ok, well what do I do? How do I get, you know, a chicken that is not coming out of a factory farm?" We didn't have options, you know, even six years ago there were no options. Now, I mean, any restaurant that wants to stop using factory farm meats can do it. And I made that decision about, you know, three years ago–that I was going to cut all factory farms out of my–my restaurant, and I did. And I'm really proud of that. I think that's something that I–I mean, does it hit our bottom line? But we weren't making much money to begin with, so…[Laughs] you know it just–it makes us feel so good. It makes me feel really good to be able to do that. I just–I'm proud to do that.

WALL: And the response from your customers, and…?

JAISINGHANI: You know, we've always been really bad at selling ourselves, so we have it in the fine print on our menu. We've never really talked about it because I come from a culture where you never talk about yourself, you know, it's like–it's taboo to brag. So we don't–but people have slowly found out and, you know, Alison Cook wrote a beautiful article a few months ago about our–our commitment to that and I was so amazed that she somehow found out that I do this–it was amazing. So now people are beginning to know it, and to me it's the only way to be–it's the future. As much as you deny it–it's– because, I mean, if you look at the underbelly of industry, they're all trying to turn into–trying to go back to conventional farming, and you know, when the American Humane Society is being invited into chicken farms, you know that they're taking it seriously. I just had one of my reps bring me a chicken sample telling me, "this factory comes from North Carolina and it has been approved by the American Humane Society," and

I'm like, "well how much?" I said, "Okay, drop the chicken off," and it's like half the price that I'm paying for my chickens now. So, and I've become–I don't believe as easily as I used to, I'll do some research in what or where these chickens are coming from before I buy them.

WALL: Interesting. In terms of uh…[phone rings]. Sorry…

JAISINGHANI: It's okay.

WALL: In terms of the restaurant culture of Houston–how does that fit in? I mean, do you love it or would you rather be anywhere else?

[Phone rings again]
JAISINGHANI (to Ajna): Honey, just unplug it. Would I rather be anywhere else? You know? No. For the longest time, I thought I should have been in New York, that, you know, Houston is not the place for this food and people are not going to get it. And I remember when the *New York Times* writer wrote about us in this magazine–it was a little article in a magazine, they were reviewing Houston and they picked five restaurants and she called me to say that, "What are you doing in Houston? You need to be in New York, your food is so off the charts, it doesn't belong in Houston." And I was so flattered, and I believed her, I was like, "yeah, you're right, we should be in New York." But fast forward ten years later–I think I'm glad I am where I am. Houston has been really–Houston has a very cosmopolitan crowd and people are very open to new food and more so than that, what Houston has that New York or other cities don't have is a love for spicy food because of all the Mexican influence here. So, given that, I was able to keep my food pretty damn spicy and they ate it up, so…

WALL: Umm, talk about–if you could kind of elaborate on that–because it is a very interesting mix of all different kinds of people in Houston and different kind of foods, how has that changed what you– your ideas that you had at first about your menus and stuff–to what it is now? Has that influenced you?

JAISINGHANI: I mean, it has to some degree. I've realized I'm not a meat eater, and I've realized how much people love meat. So, I've put more meat on my menu to keep the carnivores of Houston happy, and there's a lot of carnivores here.

START OF PART II

JAISINGHANI: I mean there are people that are just–that just want to eat a piece of meat, and I just learned to deal with that. So yeah, I have, and what's interesting also is that, you know, people think of Indian food as being, "Oh, it's so spicy and hot," and the state I grew up in–Gujarat–the food actually isn't that spicy there. They eat mild vegetarian–really simply prepared food. It's the north Indians and some of the south Indians that eat really hot food and spicy food. So, at Indika, we get more complaints from our Indian customers about food being too spicy than we do from our American–who basically come in and have no trouble eating spicy food and–a very small percentage find it…

(PAUSE)

WALL: So you were saying about–you get most complaints from…

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, from Americans than I do from Indians. I mean, from Indians than I do from Americans. I mean, the Indians–they get used to it now, so it's not so bad. And some of our foods–and having a kitchen that's mostly latin–they tend to go up and down with the heat in our foods, so we tend to…

WALL: Hmm, all of a sudden that just…let's see here…"memory full." Let's just keep recording on the iPhone recorder. We're still recording on this so we should be…

JAISINGHANI: Okay. Oh, so that's your back up?

WALL: Yeah. Oh, thank god.

AJNA: Steve Jobs…[Laughs]

WALL: Okay, that should be fine. Okay, moving past just the restaurant–this whole time you're raising kids, you're married. Talk about the juggling act that goes on there.

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, that was probably–those five years was among the most challenging times in my life. It wasn't difficult, it was just challenging. And I was so petrified that my kids would turn into little drug addicts or they'd go off into some kind of a–I don't know–that they would do something crazy. They were thirteen and eleven–or twelve and ten when I opened Indika. My son is younger than Ajna. So, it was a–and we opened the restaurant and within two years I was living by myself with the two children. So it was–it was pretty scary, but I had made up my mind that I would–it was Indika and my kids and that was it. I had nothing else outside of that. I had no social life, I had no friends–or the friends were customers that I would see on a daily basis. But, I didn't–on Sunday and Monday I did nothing but stay at home and spend time with my kids. And there were a few things that were important to me at the time and I don't know why, but there was something that I–when my kids would come back from school, I was always–almost always there–like, I never wanted my kids to be latchkey kids. So, when they came home at 3:30 or whether they had–she, she was on swim team, my daughter, so we would–she would come home late, but I was always home there to spend at least an hour or two with them. And really, that was about the only time I spent with them on a daily basis. When they came home we would eat breakfast together. We would all wake up early and we would have a hot–I mean, I would cook breakfast–and different breakfasts for both because they both had their own tastes. So I would make them both breakfast and we would eat and our day would begin together, and then it would–when they'd come back we would spend a couple hours. And that was–I guess that was really important to me, and my daughter tells me now that that was really one of the best things that we did as a family–the three of us. And then we also spent every Sunday going out for dinner with my husband. Even though we were separated at the time. We promised ourselves that we would eat a meal together once a week, so every Sunday night the four of us would go out for dinner–for years we would do that. And even sometimes we would

fight over dinner and we would argue, and the kids would fight–you know, the usual family bullshit. We still did it–every Sunday we would go out for dinner, every Sunday without fail.

WALL: The same restaurant or a different restaurant?

JAISINGHANI: It was a different restaurant–anywhere, we would–huh?

AJNA: We took turns.

JAISINGHANI: We took turns picking, yeah, where we went. And it was, you know, really anything, anything basically. The idea was just sit together and eat a meal and talk. To kind of keep the kids–I wanted the kids to feel that we were a united front as parents. I didn't want–I think one of the most damaging things you can do to kids is getting a divorce. I had already done that, so the next damaging thing you can do is basically pull the kids apart–whether, you know, they should side with mom or dad, and I didn't want them to have to–I wanted to minimize that with them. And that's what I did–I minimized–I mean, there was going to be some friction. It wasn't going to be all–there was the divorce–it had to come with its share of drama, but I was going to shield them the best I could. So I did and I, honestly– I remember this one day which–I don't think she [Ajna] remembers this very clearly, but we had moved into this little house, the street was called Gretel Lane. We had a little house on Gretel Lane, which is about two blocks from the old Indika. And we were still–she was in–she was out of town when I moved into that house but when she came back, I sat with all three of us, sat on the floor and I told them…how I was raised in India in the 70s. And I-India being a hippie land in those days, I was very good friends with a lot of architects. The architecture school was right next to the microbiology school or the science college that I went to, so I had a lot of friends that were into design architecture. And there was a lot of drugs in those days in India, and I had friends that were doing drugs, and I would see them, I was around so much of it. And something in my brain had always told me–I don't know what in my brain told me not to do it–I never did, I never tried anything growing up. And you know, you always wonder, what is it like to be on drugs? So when I sat my kids down and I told them, "you know, I've never done drugs, I grew up around it, and you guys are going to be in that when you–because they were going to move from Awty to Memorial–to public school–private to public. And I was afraid they would be exposed to stuff that, you know, I couldn't control. So I said, "if you guys want to smoke marijuana, just tell me and I'll get it for you, because my kitchen guys smoke marijuana around the back all the time. It's no big deal, I'll get it. Anything you want to do, just tell me and we'll just do it together as a family." And it's insane, but they actually believed me. And I mean, I was–I meant it at the time, and I think if I had told any counselor that they'd think I was completely nuts. But I told them that anything that they want to do–whether they want to do drugs, they want to do something absolutely wild–come home and tell me, we will do it together. I will–I just want to be there. I said, "I'm not going to be upset, you can do anything stupid. And I was such a–I was a very rebellious child. I had forged my mother's signature, I had run away from school a couple of times just to, you know, have fun, it wasn't to–because I didn't like school, I was just rebellious as a teenager. I expected my kids to do all these things, so I figured I would pre-empt that and tell them, "do what you want, just let me know what you're doing and I'll just be there to watch you." And I said, "if you're going to do drugs, let's do it together, because I want to see how it feels to smoke

marijuana–how to smoke pot." So they were like–and I remember Ajna–I don't know whether they thought that "mom is just completely crazy," or they actually–and I made them promise me and actually that promise somehow carried them through. And I'm sure my kids have smoked pot in college days and all, but at least through the years growing up in school they were just great kids and they were just–there was never any trouble with them that…[Laughs]…she's laughing because we had a couple of…[Laughs]…it's funny–boy incidents…[Laughs]

AJNA: Aw, ninth grade…[Laughs].

JAISINGHANI: Oh, Ajna, middle of the night. Yeah, I was a tyrant as a mom. I had set my standards and I wasn't like–there were some rules my kids could not break, you know? They had to come home at night, they had to tell me where they were, they could not just take off. I mean, even when I wasn't home I needed to know they were home. And because I was within two blocks, I could run back and forth, and they couldn't just, you know, leave the house. So, anyways, I think my kids are just–my kids are going to be amazing individuals. I mean they are, but they're going to move on to do great things in their lives. I know that because I've seen what they are capable of and I know that they will strike their own path.

WALL: And kind of the dynamics of…how old were your kids when you got divorced?

JAISINGHANI: Ten and twelve.

WALL: Talk about the dynamics that everybody goes through with raising kids in a broken home.

JAISINGHANI: I suffered the same things my–I think most other women do. Like I said, I really believed and I still believe that the biggest thing missing in families all over the world, I don't think it's just an American thing–is just spending time with each other. You know, is eating meals together or just talking to each other. And while we were not–you know we all had my–I think my son who's probably had the most difficulty with the divorce-and he took the biggest fall. Because when–until I was–until I opened Indika he was this, you know, extremely happy, beautiful little, wiry, enthusiastic boy of ten years old that had–I mean, he was wrapped around me. Everything that he did, he did with me. We were like buddies, we were not like mother-son. And then suddenly I just disappear from his life. He took that really hard, he ended up just going into a depression and withdrew completely, began to neglect himself, his grades went down. I had a lot of anxiety and worry over him, and public school did not suit him in the beginning. He probably would have been better in private, but it was easier to take them both out. But he was definitely more fragile out of the two and he was a little young and in hindsight, I–I mean, I guess to say this is pointless but I wanted to open Indika when my son was thirteen, that had been one of my goals–that I don't want to open it until he's–once he becomes a teenager it will be easier. It may not have been easier, but at the time the location came up and we just did it. But he definitely took the brunt of the divorce. He just didn't know what was happening, and suddenly his dad–was never a big, you know, part of his life with his physical presence because he travelled a lot and he worked, but I disappeared and, you know, dad disappeared. So he just

really took it hard and it took him many years to come out of that. He's doing great now but he went through a lot of turmoil.

WALL: So, he's at UMASS?

JAISINGHANI: He's at UMASS studying economics. He's a very spirited, determined little boy, or big boy, he's like a man now. But yeah he–I used to take my kids to India a lot before I opened Indika and once I did I would take these trips that were like three or four days long so I would not take them. So I took them about–when he was coming out of high school and going to college, I took them to India. I had taken her a couple of times throughout that five year period but I hadn't taken my son. So I took them both and–he was at the time a few pounds overweight and just was kind of depressed and I think that trip was monumental in his life. He came back from there saying, "okay mom, I'm going to lose weight and I'm going to get my act together." And over the summer, over like six months he lost fifty pounds and he completely got into shape and he, you know, he started focusing on his life and–I mean, his grades could be a lot better these days but otherwise he's very with it. My daughter Ajna was always the more mature one in a way, because she didn't have the–she was–she got over the divorce and the "this is how it's going to be" part sooner than he did. So she adapted faster and she became just–I think her phase of being traumatized or it being hard was probably from age thirteen to about sixteen or seventeen where she just grew up in a restaurant, where the waiters and all became her family. That's all she had, we had no other social life–coming to Indika to eat was all she would do outside of school.

WALL: So now that they're off in college, how are you–or I guess she's graduating from college–how are you adjusting? How did you adjust to the empty nest?

JAISINGHANI: Oh, I loved it, I loved it. You know there's a time for everything, I mean, I love my kids but it was time for them to leave and they did. And I'm really lucky that she's–Ajna's finishing architecture at UT-Austin and is now trying to apply to drama schools. So she's at home for a few months and it's wonderful having her back, because it's like–you know it's like this little gift I have of spending time with her for a few months before she takes off again. Yeah I'm–it's really good, it's not–you know it's funny, when I took–I adjusted easier to my daughter going because I had my son back with me. And she went to Austin so it's not that far. But when we went to Boston to–I went to Boston to drop my son–and I stayed in Amherst for–you know, I had booked myself for three days. And we went to see the school and do all the orientation–his orientation–and when I went back to drop him, I didn't know how long it would take settling him into his dorm. And within one afternoon, he was like, "okay mom, I'm here now," and I'm like, "okay, let's go out for dinner now," and he was like, "but actually, I'd rather go have dinner with my–at my new dorm, my new cafeteria." So I realized that he was already gone, and I remember I started crying in the car when we came down and he was like, "mom, this is what you got me ready for, remember? Aren't you supposed to be happy that I'm…?" And I'm like, "you're right, you're right," so he was being the parent then. So no, it was–it was–and I came back and I got over that really fast–no empty nesting. I'm too busy in my life to worry about that, they need to be where they are.

WALL: So now you've got a new restaurant in the works, whose idea was that? I guess it's your idea now.

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, well that was always my idea…
WALL: Is this totally you?

JAISINGHANI: It is totally me.

WALL: It's your baby?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, it is going to be totally me and I'm really, really excited. It's a–it's just a–it's taking Indian food to the street level is what I'm trying to do here. It's breakfast, lunch, and dinner with more traditional Indian food, but served in a–it's just a beautiful space and um…

WALL: Where is that going to be?

JAISINGHANI: It's going to be at Kirby and Westheimer, 2800 Kirby. It's in the new West Ave. shopping center.

WALL: Oh.

JAISINGHANI: In those big buildings around there.

WALL: So you're finally getting your Kirby location.

JAISINGHANI: I know! I know, ten years later, yeah.

WALL: So I guess this will be a little less formal?

JAISINGHANI: Oh yeah, completely. It is informal.

WALL: A change of pace?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, it will be a change of pace. Indika has it's–it's a little bit for glamour and it has its place in this town and I didn't want to compete with that. And I didn't want to do the same thing, that would just be too boring, so…

WALL: So how are you planning on juggling Indika and this new restaurant?

JAISINGHANI: Oh, that'll be easy.

WALL: Who's going to–I guess you'll just run both?

JAISINGHANI: Yeah, I'll run both. I mean, I intend to do with the new one–I intend to do more of those, it's just the beginning, so…

AJNA: Follow me to drama school.

JAISINGHANI: Huh? Yeah, I'm going to follow her to drama school, depending on where she gets in. But yeah, we're definitely hoping to do more, it's too exciting a concept for me to not do more. I mean, you know, it's going to be much more than a restaurant, it's going to be–a lot of it finally is–I finally enlisted the help of a PR firm, and we are opening this with a big bang in January. That's the plan.

WALL: Do you see yourself staying in Houston for the end of time or…what plans do you have?

JAISINGHANI: No, I don't see myself staying in Houston till the end of–I see myself staying in at least ten more years. Because that's kind of–and I've created a base here, and unless for some reason we close Indika…I might move then. But I don't–I intend to keep Indika going for the–I mean, I have this ten-year–I want to keep it open for ten more years. I think it would–I hope to continue to be creative there and do more restaurants of the new kind that I'm doing and do other locations. But, so I–in the end I hope to retire somewhere and open up a tiny restaurant that's probably a twenty seater in a hotel…

WALL: So just always working?

JAISINGHANI: Always be working, I want to be working until the day I die, I decided that. Because, you know, work has never been like "work." I get up every morning and I'm excited to come–to go to Indika. And I think when work transcends as life, it becomes–it's effortless. The physical load sometimes gets to me, but the excitement never goes away. I'm always excited to go to work–or go to Indika.

WALL: Interesting–that's about all I've got. Do you have anything else you'd like to add–anything we haven't talked about?

JAISINGHANI: No, I'm just–I'm–really nothing. I'm excited about what's coming and–really excited–I feel like it's–I feel there's a place for Indian food in the U.S. that has never really been captured–that appeals to the mainstream and I hope to capture that.