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Interview with George Manabe (Keoki's Hawaiian Barbecue)

George Manabe

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Interviewee: George Manabe

Interviewer: Chelsea Gabbard and Isabel Cabrera

Date: 20 April 2021

Location: Keoki's Hawaiian BBQ (Marina, CA)

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Length: 00:30:00

Overseer: Dr. Dustin Wright

Biography: George Manabe is the owner and creator of Keoki's Hawaiian BBQ in Marina, California. Being born and spending 38 years in Honolulu, Hawaii, George spent a lot of time working in the kitchen. It was there, in those 20 years of making plate lunches, where he learned to make his own authentic cuisine. However, he was not always in the restaurant business as George used to be a car salesman after his years of making plate lunches. It was his colleagues whom he cooked for that convinced him he should open his own restaurant. Now, Keoki's is favored by many locals and praised by all who visit.

Summary of Transcript: (01:29) George begins introducing himself as the owner of Keoki's Hawaiian Barbeque. (02:33) George begins explaining how he named the restaurant Keoki's after his only son. (03:06) George talks about his life experiences and growing up in Hawaii. (12:40) George is explaining the type of cuisine that Keoki's provides. (27:34) Chelsea and Isabel begin closing remarks and thank George once again for his time.

Interview Transcript:

Chelsea 0:00

Okay. Well then we will get this started. Can you hear us?

George 0:10

I can hear you, but maybe I should put my headphones on. One moment, Chelsea.

Chelsea 0:15

Okay, sounds good.

George 0:30

One moment.

Chelsea 0:31

Yeah, no problem.

George 0:52

Can you hear me?

Isabel 0:53

Yeah.

Chelsea 0:53

Yeah.

George

Okay, I can hear you.

Chelsea 0:59

We can hear you good. Yeah.

George 1:01

Okay.

Chelsea 1:03

So to start, since we are recording this, I'm Chelsea.

Isabel 1:10

I'm Isabel.

Chelsea 1:12

And this is our interview with you, George, um for our final project for our Pacific food empires course. So just to start things off, would you like to introduce yourself and introduce your restaurant?

George 1:29

Yes um, my name is George Manabe (pronounced as *Mana-bi*). And um, I um, am the owner of Keoki's Hawaiian Barbecue. We've been in business now for approximately seven years.

Chelsea 1:45

Okay, so I think I will also take question two; just because I incorporated something about my family as well. So, noting that your restaurant's name is Keoki's. Um, I've noted that Keoki has meaning in Hawaiian. And I actually have a family friend who was born and we call them Keoki. But now everyone calls him George. So I've kind of made that correlation. And I think on you're Yelp it says that you are a Junior (Jr.). So is there any like, inspiration behind that? Behind the name? Is that inspiration for your restaurant? Or is it simply just a name?

George 2:33

Oh, I named this restaurant after my son. I only have one son and his name is Keoki. He lives in Hawaii. Okay, maybe I named after him.

Chelsea 2:43

Oh, okay!

George 2:43

So I named it after him.

Chelsea 2:47

Okay. So, part of like inspiration for your restaurant?

George 2:53

Yes.

[Illegible Background Noise]

Isabel 2:57

Okay. Another question that we have is where did you grow up? Did you grow up around the Marina area; or did you grow up in Hawaii?

George 3:06

I was born in Hawaii; and I lived there for about 37 years total. But my father was in the military. So, you know, I lived in Europe, out in the south. Then my father got transferred over here; that's what brought us up here. Where he was stationed at Fort Ord. And I went back to Hawaii in 1975 for about 30 years. And then I moved back up here, and I sold my house in Hawaii, and moved back up here in 2005. And then I actually graduated from high school up here and then I moved [Inaudible]. Yeah, I moved back to Hawaii.

Chelsea 3:57

How interesting.

George 4:00

Since I've been back up here now since 2000... And I'd say 2012.

Isabel 4:09

Oh okay.

George 4:09

I moved back up here from Hawaii.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 4:25

I meant to say, when I moved up here, for working at a car dealership in Salinas.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 4:43

So since 2014, so it's been about seven years since I've been doing this. And I've never opened a restaurant before; but I used, I worked, I got my experience in Hawaii. Working in a couple of restaurants... And the what I was doing in Hawaii was, I was working in Waikiki as a hotel bellman for 20 something years. Then I started selling cars. And then, when I moved up here, I used to bring food to my friends at the car dealership. And, you know, I wanted them to experience what the food was like and that they were saying that I should open up my own place. And that's what I did.

Chelsea 5:32

How cool! Okay. So I believe you actually ended up answering when Keoki's opened. And so, how would you describe the reaction of the community when you actually opened Keoki's in Marina?

George 5:52

It was a slow start. We were building up in the beginning. You know, we would start off and then it just built by word of mouth. And it's stayed busy ever since seven years ago. So, you know, that's what kept me going. I knew that, you know, it takes a little time...

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 6:23

Prove that it is authentic food.

Isabel 6:30

Um, real quick question. Sorry, Chelsea. This is not on our list. It's just a question I thought of. So, me, I am from Salinas and Marina. I was raised in Marina for a little bit. And I'm Guamanian. And I know that over there, I have a lot of Guamanian relatives. And I know a lot of Samoans and other Pacific Islanders. Did you see like a lot of support coming from that since you opened in Marina, in an area that has a lot of like, Islander population around it?

George 7:01

Yes, I did experience that a lot of local people who were actually from Hawaii. And they were in the military and they moved up here... Yeah, they started hearing about me and stuff. They were very, very receptive; but the majority of my clientele now, is just the mainland. I still have a lot of local people. We got a hula group coming by this evening to perform out here. The local people are very supportive of this business.

Chelsea 7:46

Yeah, we can see that through, like, Yelp reviews, online reviews...

Isabel 7:51

Yeah!

Chelsea 7:52

Anywhere online. Um, I find it super interesting that you come from a military family, and that's what led you to Marina. It was one of our questions... You know, what made you decide to move from Hawaii to California, specifically Marina, given that you have been able to move all around?

George 8:18

Well... I actually... When I first moved back here, I moved to... My mom's been in Seaside so I don't actually live in Marina. I actually reside now in Salinas. And the reason why I moved out

here, I mean, to open up my business in Marina is because the local people from Hawaii is basically in this area here, versus Salinas. So there's a lot of islanders in this area here in the Seaside area.

Chelsea 9:00

Okay.

Isabel 9:02

Awesome.

Chelsea 9:06

So essentially the clientele made you open up your restaurant in Marina?

George 9:15

Yes.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 9:43

Her business was kind of struggling; so she had asked me if I wanted to share rent with her. And, you know, I was like I said, I was selling cars at that time and doing farmers markets part time. And we did various farmers markets like out at Pacific Grove, Salinas, and we found that out here, in Marina, there was more... We were a little bit busier than the other places because of more politicians.

Isabel 10:17

So how would you personally describe your food that you serve at Keeki's?

George 10:24

I would have to say that because I learned all this in Hawaii; I would say that a lot of people have told me that it's different from the Hawaiian restaurants up here. You know, it's more authentic. Like I said, you know, I learned all this in Hawaii, cooking. I had no idea that I was gonna open up a restaurant. But it's just through the people [PHONE RINGS] There's not any place up here that serves truly authentic Hawaiian barbeque. And like me, personally, I've tried all the places because I'd like to, you know, find someplace where I would like to go. Because I don't really like to eat my own cooking and stuff. I'd rather go out and eat some, you know, Hawaiian plate lunches and other places. But I've yet to find any that truly resembles what Hawaii is. I've been all the way up to all the ones up in San Jose, Gilroy, Santa Cruz.

Chelsea 11:42

I actually used to...

George 11:43

I've tried them all.

Chelsea 11:47

Yeah, I actually lived in Hawaii as well. I come from a military family. My dad was in the Navy. So I lived on Ford Island from like kindergarten through like third grade. And I have vivid memories of getting plate lunches from, I believe Times. And it's just something we would always get. Or like, I remember going to Leonard's bakery. Things like that, I feel like I was too young to really appreciate, you know, like Hawaiian food. And, you know, so could you tell us a little bit about what is your most popular dish? And what do you think makes it so popular?

George 12:40

Oh, um, over here at this restaurant? I would have to say that our most... it's really three of the dishes that are almost on every other plate. It's the teriyaki chicken, the chicken wings, and also the chicken katsu. I've had people tell me that they've tried wings, you know, all over the place; the truck drivers have never had wings like this before. It is unique. I haven't found any place like it either. The teriyaki chicken, I make all my own sauces and stuff for the wings as well as the teriyaki chicken. So it was a recipe that was given to me when I was working in Hawaii. So I've gotten my recipes from a few different places. You know, from like Zippy's; I don't know if you've ever heard of Zippy's but it's a pretty big fast food place out in Hawaii. And that's where I first started out; I didn't even know how to cook. And so my cousin got me a job there and I worked there for like maybe about a few months. Then I worked at Kings bakery. Which is where they make that Hawaiian sweet bread, which they sell up here. I did work out in Waikiki doing breakfast Hawaiian style breakfast; like Portuguese sausage, white sweet bread French toast... stuff like that. That's what I was doing.

Isabel 14:39

Um, so I feel like you answered this a little bit, but maybe you can expand or anything. Do you feel as though maybe you had to change any of your recipes to kind of fit the clientele over here in like the mainland. Is there anything that maybe you had to tweak or change because maybe a lot of people eat it that way in Hawaii on the island but up here in the mainland, like maybe people are more picky or don't eat things weird or like that way.

George 15:10

No. For me, this is exactly how I would make it if I was in Hawaii. The people up here haven't said anything, like it's different or stuff like that. I don't think I had to tweak anything.

Isabel 15:40

Yeah, that's awesome.

Chelsea 15:43

That's great.

George 15:46

The taste, for people's tastes up here... It is exactly the way I will do it if I was in Hawaii so I didn't need to tweak anything.

Isabel 15:53

That's great. I'm sure that's what helps make you stand out too. Like you said a lot of even like, I know, you're especially like on Yelp. And the reviews that we can see of Keeki's is that a lot of people love it there.

Chelsea 16:06

Yeah, like we're prevented from, you know, being in the area? Well, I am. I'm in Southern California at home, since the pandemic. But, you know, how has COVID-19 impacted your business? You know, positives, negatives? You know, it's impacted our ability to be in public spaces, you know, be close to each other. Can you describe maybe how the past year has been for you?

George 16:41

The past year, for me, for this business here is basically [Inaudible] came back, but we were always basically a takeout restaurant. And so now, you know, we don't have any tables in here at all, even though we can put a table in here. But our tables are on the outside. But as far as impacting this business, it actually, like I said, is it got busier and busier and busier for us, even through the pandemic.

Isabel 17:16

That's interesting.

George 17:17

Yeah, it didn't affect us at all. It's just, like I said, we've always been a takeout business; and we didn't have to shut down or anything like that.

Isabel 17:30

That's great. That's good to hear.

Chelsea 17:32

That is actually like a very, very different response from what we would probably assume would happen to a business during a pandemic. So it's great to hear as well, because it's nice to see a

business like yours be so successful. Especially because I haven't really seen Hawaiian food much either. I feel like it's one that's rare to find, especially as you said, you've learned how to make recipes in Hawaii through people who have taught you. So it's kind of hard to find anything that can beat that.

Isabel 18:15

Yeah.

George 18:18

Main thing for me is... I try to be as consistent as I could possibly be. I keep my hours, you know, consistent. So if I open up at a certain time, and I say I'm going to open up for a certain time I open up exactly on that. And then we close at the time of closing. [INAUDIBLE] Some customers travel a few miles to come up to a restaurant and if you close early, you know that doesn't, you know, go with a lot of people. So whether it's a slow day [INAUDIBLE] just try to be as consistent with the hours, the days and also the, especially the food.

Isabel 19:22

Yeah.

Chelsea 19:24

Yeah. So do you believe like consistency is something that definitely has played into your business becoming as successful as it is?

George 19:33

I believe strongly that being consistent is very, very positive for this.

Chelsea 19:45

Yeah, and I have one final question for you. We actually didn't script this but I've noticed this is that every time I'd call, you will always answer the phone. And, you know, usually you'd expect maybe other employees to pick up... Things like that, but you're very involved, it seems like. So along with consistency, do you believe that like, being involved, maybe building personal relationships like with, you know, regular customers, those kinds of things helps like, you know, being family within the community, those kinds of things.

George 20:29

Absolutely. I believe that being involved with the customers, you know, because that's the way it is in Hawaii. You know, we like to mix with the customers, and talk to them, and make them feel welcome. Just meeting people [INAUDIBLE] Just being in Europe and the South [INAUDIBLE] You know, what I have in common with just about when it comes in here. So in Hawaii, you know, call it like, having the 'Aloha Spirit'. So I believe that, you know, greeting people, or

saying goodbye to people is a big thing. Whereas, I find a lot of places, you know, they don't really talk to you. You order and that's it. So, I like to be a little bit more involved with people.

Isabel 21:43

Yeah, that's awesome.

Chelsea 21:46

It definitely shows. You're so approachable, and you know, us, I'm sure you're probably nervous for the interview. We're also nervous to, you know, reach out, we understand, you're very busy. You know, it's hard to contact people sometimes; but you're so kind and you're very generous with your time. We very much appreciate you giving us time to ask you these questions for you to share with us about your business and yourself. We really appreciate it.

Isabel 22:23

Yeah, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to do this thing here.

Chelsea 22:29

And I cannot wait to go to Keeki's in the near future.

George 22:31

I want to thank you folks too. You know, anything to help the school out. You know, we have had other people from CSU where we did something similar to this where they come down and stuff. You know, I'm more than happy to see how this all started... And how it's how it's affected. I wish I would have kind of gotten started earlier than later in life.

Chelsea & Isabel 23:06

Yeah.

Chelsea 23:08

Better late than never though. You know? The community just loves your business.

George 23:23

I really appreciate that.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 24:00

You know, and it gets a little... Should I say? I guess a little... You know like eating the same stuff all the time? You know, in Hawaii, I'd like to say I have at least 15 different places I used to go to all the time and it was something different. 15, I have at least 15 favorites spots out there

in Hawaii. Whereas out here, I don't know... [PHONE RINGS] I mean I like the Grower's Pub, The Fisherman's Grotto on the wharf. And also I found out this other place recently. The Fish Hut? Off of Cannery Row. I ate there for the first time about a month ago, and it is really good. But other than that, you know, I wish there was some places where, you know, it was more Island kind of food. Something to do.[INAUDIBLE] But I wish it was more of an island type food authentic, that is, that that would open up around here close by or someplace like that.

Isabel 25:35

I think it's interesting how you mentioned the Grower's pub. I actually have an aunt there. Her name is Jackie, she's a server.

George 25:42

Oh, that's your auntie? Wow. Such a nice lady.

Isabel 25:48

She's not Guamanian. She's from my other side of the family; but my dad is her brother.

George 25:59

Yeah, I just, every time I go there, she always serves us about once a week or so. And she's such a nice lady. Very nice. Yeah. And I plan on going over there probably sometime in the next couple of days. And so I will tell you that I spoke to you.

Isabel 26:22

Yeah, for sure. But yeah, thank you. And I also agree with you about wanting more like Islander type foods around here. I think that that really lacks in this area. It really does. I think there's like one Hawaiian barbecue here in Salinas over there, like, kind of by the Roadeo. And I think that's it.

George 26:45

There was actually another one just opened up. It's located by PetSmart. On Davis. It's called Haiku Hawaii. I tried it out, I tried it out twice already. But again, like I said, you know, it's not quite the way they do it in Hawaii. Yeah, there's a lot of barbecue or whatever it is. And then there's a haiku... Haiku Hawaiian.

Isabel 27:34

Awesome. Yeah. Thank you again for taking the time out to do this interview. It's awesome. And I'm really glad that I got to learn more about Keoki's and about you.

Chelsea 27:46

Yeah, thank you. I can't wait to be back on campus so I can drive over into Keoki's.

George 27:53

Yeah. We had a lot of students when CSUMB had classes.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 28:16

I would like to see everybody go back to school.

Chelsea & Isabel 28:21

Yeah.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

Chelsea 28:33

Yeah. I agree. Hopefully! It is looking optimistic, so.

George 28:40

Yes, absolutely.

Isabel 28:48

Awesome. Okay. Chelsea do you have any questions?

Chelsea 28:53

Nope, I think that is all. Okay. So thank you again for your time, George. I appreciate it so much. We appreciate it so much, we do.

[INAUDIBLE / POOR INTERNET CONNECTION]

George 29:17

Thank you. And I apologize for the past week; it was just so hectic.

Chelsea 29:22

No. Please don't apologize at all. Thank you so much for your time.

Isabel 29:30

Thank you. Have a good one.

George 29:32

You're very welcome. You too. Isabel, I will let Jackie know I spoke to you. Like I said, she's my favorite server.