

ACOM Oral History Project

Interview with Daved Najarian

Conducted by Alarica Hassett on May 16, 2021

Transcribed from the video by Kassian Vaubel with additional editing by Nairy Digris

Following in the family's ice cream footsteps

Alarica Hassett (AH): I have been involved, I actually became part of the ACOM Board within this last year. It's been pretty recent, but growing up with my mom [Nairy Digris] I've been basically part of ACOM since I was born. It is kind of cool and neat for me to be doing this interview and doing something official; it makes me feel like I'm doing something real (?).

Alright, so let's get started. I'm just going down this list of questions:
How did you get started in the food/restaurant business?

Daved Najarian (DN): Well for starters I absolutely love cooking, and grew up with my mom in the kitchen and making Armenian dishes and stuff like that too. But I love food, love cooking. Specifically, my dad, Dave, who actually was the one that was in restaurant stuff, a couple of restaurants and coffee shops and things like that. So I grew up around it. I started working, I mean shadowing him at business ever since I can remember, and then started actually officially working as far as making some money when I was 14, scooping ice cream at the ice cream shops and so that's kind of how that trajectory happened, but grew up around it, I realized that I loved it. Loved cooking, love food. It's been a little bit of a journey in that respect both on the professional side and personal side.

AH: Fourteen is really young, but good for you! This isn't part of the list of questions, but are both your parents Armenian? This is just for my own curiosity.

DN: No, my dad is, but it was cool; my mom has picked up a lot of the [Armenian] cooking tradition specifically, which is really awesome because his mother had everything done—was able to pass those recipes on. I grew up with the dolma and the cheese boereg and baklava and things like that. And I actually have learned now from her, because I love cooking and all that, so she was able to carry that down and basically feed us all great Armenian dishes. But he is the one that is from that side—Armenian.

AH: Very good, OK, so obviously I think you kind of touched on this already: Is this a family-run business?

DN: Absolutely! All the ice cream shops; we now have just opened our third location. The Stillwater location has actually been around for almost 100 years, so since 1923, which is wild! My dad bought that in 2006 I believe, 2005 or 2006. And so that's when I started to work in the ice cream shop. And then I opened the St. Paul location off of Snelling in 2014, and that was kind of my baby coming out of college and stuff, and [I] pampered that a little bit and then I started managing the Stillwater location and that [St. Paul] location and then this past year, during all of the pandemic craziness a spot became available off Marshall Avenue in St. Paul, and so that's when we opened our sister store, Nellie's. The other shops are Nelson's Ice Cream and then the sister shop is Nellie's, where we do something a little bit different. All the ice cream and, yeah, family run. Growing up, I'm one of five children, and everyone up to my eldest sister down to my youngest brother—I taught them how to scoop and all that, and we worked together in the shop consistently. It was fun and cool; everyone's kind of taken a different trajectory, but definitely spent some time behind the scooping counters.

AH: Very cool, awesome! Again, I think a lot of these questions you are already kind of answering, so I'll just ask them anyway: how many ice cream shops do you have? And I think you just said that like a second ago.

DN: Right now it's the three, and we do the catering as well, so that was something, again it got a little disrupted last year with COVID and all that, but I bought an old 1980's Coca-Cola trailer—food trailer thing—and converted it over to doing ice cream. We were able to do ice cream out of that, sign up for a bunch of events; they obviously got cancelled last season, but now we're kicking off and doing more catering this year, so that's definitely a new kind of thing. I'm not a fourth location exactly, but being able to do the off-site scooping and all that's pretty fun: graduation parties, weddings, family reunions, all that jazz.

AH: Kind of three-and-a-half.

DN: Yeah, we'll call it that.

AH: Super Cool! That's actually interesting, I mean you have a trailer? I guess it's not impossible: throw ice cream in the back of a truck and give it to people. Why not? It's an ice cream truck now.

DN: Yeah, it's cool, we did it on like a retro style, kind of 50's, 60's vibe, so it's cute.

AH: Do you make your own ice cream? That's a good question.

DN: Good question. So no, because we didn't have the production capabilities. What we did is we actually partnered with a local gentleman; his family's been making ice cream for three generations. He's small batch, custom makes ice cream for Nellie's, literally in batches of four of those tubs at a time. Very small batch, custom for us, and we kind of put our heads together and figure out what we're going to do for flavors and all that jazz. But just because if you've been to the Stillwater Nelson's, it's just a shack essentially. It's a very, very small building in a residential area, so there's no way to really do any production just because of the size there, so we had to look elsewhere and kind of source stuff that way.

AH: Well, that makes complete sense, but it's really cool that you do still keep it really, really small, so it's not just like the massive vat of ice cream and also cool that you get to decide on your own flavors too.

DN: Yeah, definitely.

AH: Which brings me to the next question: Which are your favorite flavors of ice cream?

DN: My personal, so I'm a big coffee lover, so the java chunk is going to be me all the way. I know it's also kind of polarizing but the black licorice is one of my favorites.

AH: Ooooh!

DN: I know, see, there you go! Yeah, polarizing. Love it or hate it! Mint chip for sure... as far as like, popular flavors, Pirate's Booty is one of the most popular ones that we do, and that's a caramel-based ice cream with M & M's and Oreos, so just sweet on top of sweet, but very decadent and good. And then one of the ones at the new shop that I'm excited about is a Maple Bacon, so it's actually maple; it's like breakfast and ice cream, and it's a little bit again out there, but maple and bacon, kind of that savory sweet combo. That one's really tasty.

AH: I mean maple bacon has been something that's been super popular everywhere. I think it's just, first of all it's fine maple-cured bacon so why not make it into... ice cream, I guess? So that's brilliant! Have you tried out the Maple Bacon? Have you gotten any good reviews on it?

DN: Yeah, the people that have... if you're gonna go for something like that, I feel that you already kind of know that you might like it, you know what I mean? It's pretty relatively adventurous to have meat in your ice cream out of the gate, so ... We've gotten really good feedback. We were playing around originally with one that had candied bacon vs. just regular salty bacon and the salty bacon kind of won out in a taste test. Again, because you have that balance of salty and sweet, and who doesn't like that? So yeah, so far so good.

AH: Awesome, so other than ice cream what do you serve in your shops?

DN: Right now we've kind of streamlined stuff and it is predominantly ice cream stuff. We do have beverages, and at the Nellie's location we do cookies and a variety of baked cookies, because we specialize in the ice cream cookie sandwiches there. We partnered with someone who shares the space—a local baker, Rachel, and she bakes all of our cookies. It's just basically right next door, in-house style. Peanut butter and oatmeal raisin, a really good chocolate chip with two types of chocolate chip, chocolate chocolate chip, a sugar cookie, that type of thing is the focus there. Those are baked fresh right there, and then we stick to what we know, ice cream. We don't try to get too fancy with it. I think at our Stillwater location there's 46 flavors, so it's already a lot going on as it is.

AH: So 46 flavors all at once?

DN: Yes, 46 at that location and then at Nellie's, the new location, we have 20 [flavors] and then six different cookie options. I think I did the math and there's 6400 combinations with toppings that you can do. I mean there's plenty of choices but it's kind of focusing on our sweet spot there, pun intended.

AH: Yeah, boy! It's a lot of cavities!

DN: *Laughing ...*

AH: Yeah, that's a lot of cavities. No, I'm just teasing. You know, I have a terrible sweet tooth, so I'm just listening to you, and I'm thinking sugar, sugar sugar! And it's making my eyes swirl like a crazy person, so this is ... probably picked the right person to do this interview, or maybe not because I'm going to get so distracted

Further on, the next question, this is again something that you've already touched on, but where are the locations?

DN: The flagship in Stillwater, and that's off Olive and Greeley Street, on the corner, so it's kind of residential. It's up from downtown for those people that have been to Stillwater, they know the downtown strip with antique stuff, all that, we're actually up from there... three streets up from downtown in a little residential area, and we have parking. The second location, which I mentioned, opened in 2014 is off Snelling and Randolph, on the corner there. Across from the Walgreens there, and there's also Plum's Bar there, that's kind of been a staple in that area for a while. And then the most recent location is actually in an old ice cream shop, Izzy's Ice Cream. If any of your listeners/viewers are familiar, off Marshall Avenue. And that's close to Marshall and Cretin, right next to the University of St. Thomas, so lots of students are out and about there. And I know one of your questions was about hiring, and we predominantly hire high school students and some college kids, and that location is definitely no exception there.

AH: Oy yeah. Izzy's, that was there just a couple of years ago.

DN: Yeah, we were really sad to see them go. I talked with Jeff [Jeff Sommers, former Izzy's owner] maybe three months ago now. Because my wife went to St. Thomas, and my sister went there as well. I grew up ... you know, that was one of our date spots. I'm glad we can follow in their ice cream footsteps. But we were sad to see them go, for sure.

AH: But that being said, it's taken over by Armenians so I will take that any day! I don't care what it is, you can take over and do what you will. IF it's Armenian I will support it.

DN: Done! Done!

AH: So, are family members involved in running these shops?

DN: Yes, as I had mentioned, coming up, everyone had worked in the shops. Right now it is predominantly my wife, myself, my dad and mom, with some help here and there from my brothers, who just graduated college or are in college. They'll come back and help, hit or miss, with catering stuff or heavy lifting, ... *laughing...* that sort of thing. And the little one. My son definitely has helped with the taste testing, and developing a young sweet tooth and all that. Historically everyone's been involved, but right now it's mostly my wife, myself, and my mom and dad.

AH: And again, we talked about this a second ago, but what is the source of most of your employees for your businesses?

DN: Oh, and something we figured out early on is the high schoolers. We really like to be people's first job actually. Not that experience hurts you in any situation, but it's really cool to help a lot of these kids through what it's like to have a first job, and watch that development. From start to finish you get referrals; we basically hire almost exclusively off of referrals, and hire family members of family members. We have at our Stillwater location we have multiple families where it's like three or four of the kids are all working there. I know it's crazy! Either you schedule them on the same shift or you don't, depending on—that's kind of a trick you want to say...

AH: Oh!

DN: All about the relationships there. Yeah, high schoolers and college kids a little bit here, there, when they're back on summer breaks, but it's not like we have any full-time employees. Obviously, this is part-time work for a lot

of kids, and we are seasonal. We typically run our season from April to end of October, depending on ... it's around Halloween. But yeah, local young kids really, of all walks.

AH: You mean seasonal, all of your stores close after Halloween?

DN: Yes. We found out early on, you know, we want to be very busy. Kind of like an all or nothing; we're volume based and value driven as far as our operations, so for us to basically break even or make money we have to be pretty busy—1000 people a day or something like that. We just tried it the first few years beyond the Stillwater location to be open, and, "Oh, we'll do a little coffee here, we'll try this there." And it ended up just not being worth it on our end, and because we do work pretty hard running around in the summer, we now have a little bit of time in the winter when we take off. We can work hard, play hard in that respect, and I think it's the best balance for life and everything really.

AH: Oh for sure. You know, Minnesota winters? Who wants to eat ice cream?

DN: You know, Minnesotans are hardy, they'll eat ice cream, but when it's January and February negative 20, negative 30 gets a little hard to sell the ice cream. *Laughing*

AH: I completely understand. The cost of operating and keeping everything running when you're going to get a couple of those weird customers that love ice cream in January ...

DN: And I'm included in the weird customers, because I'll eat ice cream year-round, for sure! But there's not enough of me out there.

AH: Yes, I completely agree. That makes sense especially for the balance. That's a brilliant idea, I would say, to have six months of the year off.

Are there particular aspects of the business you personally handle? DO you do everything?

DN: Well, I can do everything, but I typically don't like to. Obviously, we like being very hands on, so I love to literally be on the line scooping ice cream for people, and I'll take those at any opportunity I can, but it's important for us to obviously work on the business as well as in the business, so I'm doing all the hiring, all the scheduling. My dad does a lot of the book work on the back end, training, that sort of thing. Like I said, I love to actually get in there and be hands-on, so it's pretty often you'd see me at one of the shops doing that. It's kind of a little triangle. Like yesterday I did the full drive triangle and hit all the stores in a day. Actually, I was out in St. Paul twice. I'm definitely in and out. And I think that it's important for us to not be super absentee ownership. I'd like to have just three stores and run them really, really well, than have six stores and be absentee and never there, and then not gave a good product, and not have a good experience for customers. I think we're kind of at that point now where we feel that we have a good handle on it and a good balance on it. I get to be in there and show face as much as I'd like to, my wife the same way. And I think if you get too far out there then it doesn't have a family feel either. I recognize the customers for the most part, and you get to see your regulars. And some of the people in St. Paul, I'm scooping what they're getting before then even are there. I mean literally that you know you're in line—I see someone in line and I know he's going to get White Chocolate Raspberry Truffle; I just started scooping it. And that's kind of cool, and you start to lose that element if you get too big.

AH: Well, and it's a lot less common to see that level of family involvement in a business, or personal involvement. Because I think everything these days has become so—I'm trying to find the right word—the first thought that's coming into my mind is like "big box", there's just a lack of really true small businesses that are super into it. You know, you can make the comparison between yours and a Dairy Queen. I never saw Mr. Dairy Queen when I went to Dairy Queen, you know what I mean? I just appreciate that.

DN: Yeah, well we obviously feel the same way because we've talked about it, and we would love to grow, but we've talked, only maybe if it's a family member. One of my younger brothers is graduating college, and if he decides to join the family business, then it's like, okay, now you have to have your own shop. Or whatever it is, rather than just trying to do more with what we have now. Wait until maybe someone else is interested in the family it's an opportunity to expand.

AH: Awesome, well, we'll move on here: Again, I think you've mentioned this already before, but do you have stores in other states?

DN: We don't as of now. Again, right now for the ease of us being able to physically in there we're just in St. Paul and Stillwater. I would like—just my proximity to Wisconsin and Hudson, WI, and things like that, if there was an opportunity where if a sibling was more involved and able to take a store on or something like that, I think that would be a cool expansion opportunity, but for now we're looking good. With the catering obviously we have the mobile element, so we can get out to Wisconsin if needed for events

AH: I guess being mobile means you could go anywhere you wanted to, which is a really great idea. So again, what are your plans of opening anything outside of Minnesota?

DN: Right now, like I think I said, I think that we're feeling pretty good the way that we are. We want things to stay within the family. I mean, people have reached out to us too, like we can franchise it. We love the concept, we want to open one here, open one there. We've talked about it a lot of times and although it could be more money in the short term or something, we just don't feel comfortable with it because we're worried that you'd have problems and not have it be Nelson's, essentially. That's more important to us than anything at this point, not that that might not change, but for now I think unless it's a family member you probably won't see any more expansion out of us.

AH: Alright, cool. Is there anything else that you would like the community to know?

DN: Come out! Come out and check out the stores! I'm really excited about the newest location, Nellie's Ice Cream, and that's cool just because we do the custard ice cream cookie sandwiches. You can pick your bottom cookie, pick the ice cream that you want in the middle, pick a different top cookie. We've got something cool going on there where you can hot press the ice cream sandwich which will warm up the cookies and keep the ice cream frozen. [We have] roll-in toppings, so if you want something that's a little different—I haven't seen that anywhere in the Midwest, so I think that's something different, better, special, that you don't really see out here, at least right now. Come check us out and say "hi"! If you see me in there, I'd love to meet other local Armenians and stuff, so please, if you recognize me—we might have a mask on, but who knows? If you think you recognize me, say "hi" and I'd love to talk, or set up a time to have a conversation with you or just get to know the community a little bit better. Because when you reached out too, it got me excited about getting a little more involved. It's not something I've, unfortunately, really had time to do recently, so I'd like to turn that over and get to know more Armenians! I mean, what's bad about that?

AH: Come join us! Join us! You'll definitely be seeing me in there, and we already drove past it once, and I mean, yeah, I will be there. I just hope that you have insulin flavored ice cream because I feel you'll be walking out with diabetes within two seconds, oh my gosh.

DV: Yeah, I hear you on that. It's everything in moderation but when you go, do it right! You gotta get everything. Do it all.

AH: No, I could completely agree. I also completely agree with your coffee flavor ice cream; that is probably one of my favorite flavors and has been ever since I was a kid. I will not do the black licorice though.

Thank you so, so much for your time. It was such a pleasure. You know, obviously we wish you the best, and I really, really enjoyed doing this and meeting you, and I'm glad we got to do it via ZOOM too.

DN: Yeah, definitely. It's good to put a face to the name and connect up, and so hopefully that'll continue more in the future too. Thanks so much for the call, and for reaching out and spreading the word too. As a business owner, obviously I appreciate that a lot, so thank you.

AH: Oh Yeah! If we're going out for ice cream I'll be getting as many people to go to any of the locations, and I have a couple of really good friends that live that area, so I know at least they will be there joining the Armenians eating the Armenian ice cream.

DN: Good! Good!

AH: Well, thank you again, both from myself and also from the ACOM Board.

DN: Yeah, and reach out if you have any other questions. Thanks so much for the interview.