

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: **Mustafa TELLESY**
Interviewers: Nazima Khan & Richard Bradbury
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Transcribed by: Dawn Eldridge

Intro: We are at New Horizon cafe; today is 21st December 2012 interviewing Mustafa Tellesy

Q. We wanted to find out about your cafe, if you can tell us some history, how you started.

It's an idea we start business me and my partner Hashem Rashid 13 years ago and because there is a lack of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean food available in Exeter so we decided to open this coffee shop and we sit together and decided together what food we were going to sell the customer and we opened this place and it was a good idea for people from the Middle East and Mediterranean to find a place where they could eat their traditional Middle Eastern or Mediterranean food. About the food itself, we decided not to rely on suppliers of ready-made food, we decided to prepare the food the way we would prepare it ourselves the best quality things and in a traditional way, and it was a good idea because everybody liked our food. There wasn't any complaint whatsoever, everybody was happy about the taste, the quality also the value as well. Our price is not very high so especially for the student, and don't forget Exeter is a student town, and at Exeter University there is a lot of foreign students especially from Middle East.

Q. So when did you start, what year, can you remember?

Not remember, but it was 13 years.

Q. And was it Halal?

Yes from the start when we started the business we did it as a corner shop and coffee shop and restaurant. And then because of the demand of the food we cancelled the corner shop and we put tables inside.

Q. So you supplied Halal food as well.

Yes it's Halal food.

Q. Were you the only ones supplying Halal in Exeter?

There is a company called Euro Food and they supply Halal chicken and the Halal meat that sort of thing we buy from the local Halal shops in Exeter.

Q. No, what I meant was, were there any other people selling Halal food?

No there is some place selling Halal and I think the Indian restaurants and that sort of thing most of them sell Halal.

Q. So you had competition?

Yes in a way, the real competition when there is one supplier for different places, that's where there is competition, but when your food is different the way it's cooked is different everything is different, you feel your own food has its own personality. Sometimes, even after us there are some people who opened doing the same thing, but usually the people tried in the other places but within 2-3 weeks the customer comes back here because the taste is different.

Q. So what brought you to Exeter in the first place, because you have been here longer than 13 years?

I've been in Exeter nearly 30 years now, when I came to Exeter I came to the University to do a PhD studies and then I decided to... because at that the Libyan government and that sort of things... dictatorships, so I decided to import and export and I did management consultancy and that sort of thing

Q. In Exeter?

In Exeter for nearly 15 years and then we decided to open this business.

Q. Did you face any difficulties?

No, not at all.

Q. I am sure people liked the variety of food.

Because as I told you Exeter city is a student city and I think during the university holidays everybody will suffer even the taxi driver will suffer

Q. Economy wise...

So we are a business like any other business in Exeter, we are not London where there are tourists every day and there is a high population you are not rely regular customers, but here you have to rely on regular customers and sometimes your regulars are students and if they are on holiday, so it's during the holidays sometimes it goes quiet but when their studies start the businesses revives again.

Q. Can I ask you about the mosque?

The mosque when I came to this town in 1982 it was open and it was a small place and then they started to expand to another building then they built the new mosque and I think it's a place where you practise your religion and at the same time it is a social place where you could meet your friends - you miss them during the week because they are working, or studying or in different places, so it's a good idea to meet people and the people you couldn't see during the week.

Q. In 1982 was the mosque there?

As far as I know they opened it in 1979 because as far as I know it was in 1982 just established because they appointed the new Imam and this sort of thing, the Sudanese brother.

Q. And that was in York Road, the old building?

Yeh

Q. I know you say students are your main customers, because the mosque was there maybe they had more communities from the Muslim...

Yes. We helped the mosque with feeding the *iftar* there is various connection between us and the Islamic centre, not business-wise but social and relation-wise, you know.

Q. Did you feel any prejudice or racism whilst you've been in Exeter?

No, not at all.

Q. Not even after 9/11

I mean basically I never face it, maybe you [Nazima] might face it

Q. Yes, it's always the women who face it, I don't know...

Sometimes, yes the women because wearing the hijab this sort of thing, or the dark colour. But personally I have been here 30 years I never feel prejudice or this sort of thing. Maybe once or something.

Q. Not even after 9/11

No.

Q. I want to ask you about Halal food because one of my friends when we were talking, she said 'what is Halal' and she said she thought Halal is a cow, especially for a Muslim person to eat, she didn't understand it is the way it is slaughtered. Do you get people, Muslim students maybe, other people who don't know what is Halal?

No. I think Halal is the same way of Abraham when he killed the sheep and there is a little bit differences between religions, like when the Jewish say for example, the kosher, usually they slaughter with very, very sharp knife and usually just one way. By the way the knife doesn't go like this... only one cut.

The Muslim they do the same but usually the knife... and the whole idea to get the blood out the carcass, the goat or cow or something.

And even the Christian, I saw the slaughterhouse, usually they enter the knife from here to here which is cutting the blood supply, so the blood is coming out.

Q. So can I ask you some more general questions?

Yes.

Q. What do you like about living in Exeter?

Small place, you don't feeling the same feeling in the big cities, you don't feel loose in the society, sometimes you feel you are part of the society itself. And I think this kind of feeling always in the small towns or small cities always you feel that feeling, but if you are in London you feel nowhere you are not belong to anything.. even if you live in place you can not know the place because you are working maybe in the city or the other side of London you come back late and every day it is the same story, so you feel that you are a small spot in a very big... Where here, you feel... if you want the cafe, or the mosque or the high street it is very close to you. If you want help from a neighbour it is very close to you. You meet the same people maybe every day and I think this kind of feeling is relaxing inside. Sometimes in the big cities you don't get that kind of feeling. That's why the people who's living in London or New York or the big cities, usually they are not comfortable, but living in Exeter is not like living in the village where you feel more belong to nature.

Q. I just don't talk to the neighbours..

Yes, but you could talk to the trees. Or the birds

So is there anything that irritates you about living in Exeter?

No.

Nothing at all?

No.

Q. So, you like small cities?

I like small cities. I lived some time in America, in Seattle. You can't believe it sometimes because of the difference in the time and it is a big city, you feel like you are living in another planet. But here in a small town like Exeter, even you feel you are close to your homeland – say for example Libya or Tripoli. I mean I could go to Heathrow, catch a flight – two hours I would be there. But that kind of feeling in America, sometimes you couldn't sleep at night, thinking because if you are going to trouble to live here it takes 9 or 10 hours to be there. But there between the time if you are sleeping, in your country it is the day. So this kind of feeling it will not make you happy or relaxed in a way.

Q. The UK is very central isn't it?

Yes.

Q. So what is your earliest memory of Exeter? What made you think when you got here, this is where I will stay for thirty years?

The only thing - because as I came from the Mediterranean - I came from Tripoli - always anybody from the Mediterranean always thinking about olive oil, garlic, aubergine this kind of thing. Or cappuccino, espresso this kind of thing because you know we have been occupied by the Italians.. when I came to Exeter, there was not shop whatsoever used to sell olive oil - they used to sell it in pharmacies

Q. Oh really!

Yes small bottles as medicine and the exotic vegetable they used to sell it in Dingles at the back, there is vegetable shop at the back –they used to sell chillies, garlic, aubergine, mangoes otherwise you couldn't find that sort of thing in any other place.

Q. Even in supermarket?

Even in supermarket, yeah. I used to bring those things from London. I used to go to Ealing Broadway to buy the things I want.

Q. I had a friend who moved from New York to Exeter and she said after 10 years when she saw a red pepper in Sainsbury's of the Guildhall she started crying with joy..

Yeh, that's true! When Sainsbury bring the olive oil to their supermarket, I used to be very happy and after 2 days buy a bottle!

Q. That's changed yeh?

Yes I think it's changed because... most of the middle class in Britain, all of Britain even Exeter, they started travelling to Spain to the Mediterranean to Tunisia. And they find the taste, the real taste of the food, the garlic, olive oil and I think everybody started to change - I think the whole of Exeter only recently, maybe 10 years ago.. cappuccino, espresso etc.

Q. So if somebody said to you: Mustafa, how would you describe yourself? What would you say?

Usually this question to be asked to the other side... to my customer. Myself, happy, connect with people, honest. Because I am staying in this place, whenever the customer.. I feel happy because I enjoy what I cook for them.

Q. But would you call yourself British, Libyan? Muslim?

I reached the point where I could call myself International.

Q. That's a good answer!

Because the problem is, even my Arabic language now, because I live in Exeter and you meet the Saudis, you meet the Kuwaitis, the Egyptians, the Libyans you try to produce a language which could be understandable by all parts and say, for example, if I talk to Libyans, sometimes he feel I talk different to the Libyans because, first of all, about myself, I studied at university at Cairo, I spent 4 years in Cairo university. And then I spent one year or one year and a half in America. Most of my time travelling - Italy, Greece, Cyprus different places, so the time I spent outside my country more than the time I spent in my country, so that is why I could call myself International!

Q. So you like travelling?

Yes I used to, not any more, I used to travel a lot.

Q. So how many languages do you speak?

I speak French little bit of French, I used to speak fluent French. Little bit of Italian because Libya - we used to have Italians living with us we used to have Italians as neighbours, and English and Arabic. But the French I lost, mostly because I spent 30 years here in England without practising my French at all.

Q. How is the business going?

It's up and down.

Q. It depends on the students?

Yes.

Q. So do you get busy on Eid days, like Christmas days?

No, no we have some parties at Christmas before the Christmas but only three or four. It's alright, better than last year.

Q. Do you do the cooking?

I do the cooking and the cooking I don't accept it as a professional because I travel a lot and I have friends in different parts of the world and usually I am the one who do the cooking because I enjoy it. And I think with cooking it's like composing the music with different instruments and for every piece of music you have to put the right instrument to compose that piece. And I think for every certain type of food you have to put the right spices and the right ingredients so you could compose a very, very nice meal. Sometimes when I am not in the mood, I don't cook very well.

Q. So your mood goes in the food. So how did you learn to cook?

Just by chance, believe me some meals are my own creation, I never follow the book or measure the ingredients even the salt - just like this..

Q. That's a proper chef isn't it?

Yes because today they eat the vine leaves and usually you eat it cold and it's only rice and pine nuts. But there is other type of vine leaves we do it with rice, flat leaf parsley... I'll bring you some....and meat

Yes and because today I am not in the mood, I did the mix and I forget the meat, I started stuffing it until half of the saucepan I discover I forgot the meat, so the underneath is vegetarian and the top... [breaks off]

Part 2

The vine leaves, the problem is they are very sour. These ones are sour because I put a lot of pomegranate sauce. You have to soak it 3 hours or 4 hours in water. You buy layers of vine leaves in a packet from Turkish shop.

Q. Can we ask you some more general questions about life in Exeter?

Yes.

Q. Would you say you support any particular political party?

Not at all. I dunno, my feeling... I mean I used to support Labour and then during Blair, they started entering the same road as the Conservatives so since then I feel...

Q. Disillusioned?

No, not interested. I like to discuss politics, because I think politics is part of life, but, it's a way of discussing, but not to be in a party or something like that. You have to discuss it because you have some thoughts in your mind and you have to express it. And definitely what's wrong, you have to disagree with it, not matter comes from where.

Q. What would you say are the big issues you'd want to talk about, or should I suggest some. Last year David Cameron said he thought multiculturalism in Britain was a project that had failed.

I think this one is very big question...

Q. We have a customer so we should stop.

Part 3

[David Cameron saying Multi-culturalism is a failed experiment]

I think this question, it has nothing to do with the politicians. Usually the culture accepted by both sides, in harmony like when I talking about the Mediterranean food – the English accept the Mediterranean food because they try it, they like it and becomes one of the food in their table. Nobody force them to do this. And I think the culture the same, I mean even I will accept what nice in the English culture, the English they will accept what nice in my culture, and that's how, but I don't think so the politician they could do anything about it whatsoever unless there is purpose for political reasons.

So do you think he said it because he was worried that something he thinks of as British culture is being worn away, or why?

I mean, around the world, if you look to the history it's like a wave, you cannot stop it. Something you can not stop There is civilisation demolished, and another civilisation comes up. Or another culture move other culture and... But this kind of barrier very, very difficult to build. You can't stop them you say, I want the English to be like

traditional English, it's not a tradition in English any more, if you talk about the, say for example, the tradition. Because you are part of the, this world [door opens] unless you close to yourself in a cell, and you say "that's my life, I want to live my life"

The world is open to each other, you cannot build up barriers. If you are going to build up barriers, you are not drinking the tea now, you are not eating the same food you are eating it 40 years ago, or 100 years ago. You cannot use the olive oil, why are you using the olive oil for example? You cannot say for example "oh I will read the English literature, I will not read the Indian or the Arabic or whatsoever". Because that the sense of the human, the human is open to all the doors. You accept what you feel you like and you refuse what you don't like. But nobody in the top say the British culture is in danger. What are you going to do if it is in danger?

Q. Well, some people would say kick people like you out of the country.

But that will not end that things, maybe English woman she will marry a Libyan or Libyan comes to marry an English woman, or the opposite

Q. No, I agree.

You can't, you can't. If that happens then the Roman will be Roman and the Greeks will be Greeks and wherever you go it will be the same.

Q. And the Romans will still be bringing olive oil to this country like they did 2000 years ago.

Yes, that's the way of the movement of the civilization.

Q. And do you feel part of that big movement?

I feel part of it, because there are nice things in the English culture, I feel it and I behave it.

What?

I am doing things my fellow Libyans in Libya are not doing, because I accepted here. So for example if I promise you 2 o'clock I will be 2 o'clock or before 2 o'clock.

Q. Yes, I don't follow the British policy too much - I am a Kenyan.

Q. So last question, tell us a story.

I don't know what story.

Q. Tell us a story your mother told you when you were little. Any story you want. It can be religious as well.

I don't remember, because I have passed the childhood.

Q. Do you go back home?

Yes I have been back to Libya after the liberation. But still the things are not settled yet. I think when you miss democracy for 40 years it is very difficult to get it back.

Q. Thank you very much.

End of interview