



A Better Life? Call Your Elders: Cooking with Philip and Niki

In Philip Zias' words, "I never thought I can cook." Hear how the pandemic changed that for the 82-year-old Greek immigrant.

Ad Break

Zahir Janmohamed: I'm Zahir Janmohamed...and this is Call your Elders...a special segment from A Better Life?

In this series, we're speaking to immigrant elders about what challenges they have faced in the past, what brings them joy in this moment, and what advice they have for the rest of us.

Anna Dilena is a student at New York University. She grew up on Long Island...not far from her grandparents, Philip and Niki Zias. They immigrated to the United States from Greece in 1962.

Anna recently spoke to them about how they have been coping during these times.

Anna Dilena: My pappou has always loved food. In fact, his favorite story to tell is about his first time ordering at an American restaurant, where instead of asking for a *servng* of chicken, he asked for the *whole* chicken. Either way, he still managed to eat the entire thing. Now, at the age of 82 years old, he is still learning how to adapt to new circumstances.

Philip Zias: You ready to hear this? I never thought I can cook. Not even, uh, to, to wash a plate. No, not even to, to boil an egg. I never thought. And uh, also from my tradition in the family, in the, my country, the men don't cook, only the woman The men only eating, not cooking.

Anna: After my pappou met my yiayia, they moved to Bayside, Queens. They were surrounded by a Greek community that always centered around the church. My yiayia would often throw parties and prepare food for over 60 people, especially when it was time to celebrate my pappou's name day: an Orthodox-Christian tradition to honor the apostle Philip, the saint he was named after.

Niki Zias: Yes, of course, all the job I did it. Always I hear my name. 'Niki, give me that. Give me this. Give me that.' Even doesn't even take the underwear from the drawer. All the womans give that. [Speaks Greek.] [Laughs.]

Anna: My grandparents haven't been apart for 64 years. And after being isolated in their home for months, they discovered a whole new way of being together.

Philip: As I remember, all my life, I never saw something like this. In the second world war, about four years old, I was. I didn't get so, so much scaring, not even my parents, but now this virus is very scary.

Niki: I live[d] in a little island, eight children in the family. I never be sick and I never hear even from my grandma, from my mother. Uh, sometimes I sick in summer, I have a little fever and I go to the doctor, give me medication, and a couple of days I feel perfect.

Philip: Anna, I'm telling you the truth, in the beginning, I didn't believe it was so big thing, the virus. And I started scaring because I'm, uh, I have, uh, diabetes and I, I feel, uh, if I get sick, I gonna be die. And I stay home with, uh, no communication with nobody, not even with the family.

I used with my friends to play once a week poker. We play now for 20 years. We never stop. And this year, we stopped playing. We are afraid to meet each other and we keep calling from each other by phone. That's, that's the big thing for me and for my friends too.

Niki: I'm not missing poker game because I'm not playing and I hate the poker.

Philip: [Speaks Greek.]

Niki: No, I don't play, I don't play poker. I miss the driving. I miss the stores. I miss the shopping. I miss to go to my daughter's house.

Philip: I missed, I missed a lot. Uh, the, the parties. The best time in my life I ha — I had those years. My wife is an excellent, and a good, good cooker. She was making so nice food. Everybody was waiting when we gonna make celebrate — some celebrate to come at my house to eat my wife's food, or the cakes, or the cookies.

Niki: ...and I cook almost one week. I invite 60 people in the house and the half week cook and the another half week bake. Everybody comes to see the table. Everybody's surprised. So I cook, I take care of the kids and I'm sewing the dress I wear on the party.

Philip:...but we had music, a lot of music, life music.

Niki: I knew it is a lot of work, but it make me happy that time because I'm young, but now I stop cause I'm older, you know? The grandchildren come, so I make cake and I bring to my daughter house, special koulourakia — the grandchildren love it. So now I wait, my daughter, she's gonna make parties.

Right now, I feel much better because I live together for my husband. I'm not going anywhere. I stay for three months inside the house and I started to teach him to cook...

Philip: I try to cook and whatever I can I know I do it, whatever I don't know, I am asking. Every little while I'm calling her, 'How you're doing this? How do you do this?

Philip: You wanna...ας το κάνουμε (let's make) hamburgers?

Niki: No, no, no.

Philip: Fry?

Niki: Ναι, ναι. (Yes, yes.)

Philip: Ah, fry.

Philip: She's teaching excellent. And, uh, I'm very, very happy. We cooking every day, every day, different foods.

Niki: I teach him a lot of recipes. Soup, dolmades, pita, stuffed peppers, leg of lamb and potatoes, pastichio, mousaka...

Philip: You like I cut some tomatoes from the garden?

Niki: Δεν έχεις? (You don't have?)

Philip: Εχω, έχω. (I have, I have.)

Philip: We did uh, a kind of shrimps with, uh, sauce, but different way. And, uh, the sauce, we make a separate sauce, separate the shrimps...

Niki: No, the shrimps they put on the sauce.

Philip: Yeah, alright.

Niki: And then they have the rice white.

Philip: It's a lot, a lot of work on this, too mess for the kitchen, but, in the end you have a good food. [Laughs.]

Anna: I asked my pappou, who is a better cook, you or yia yia?

Philip: Whatever she knows. I learned exactly like her, when, when you taste food from her and taste from my food, it's the same tasting.

Anna: I then asked my yiayia the same question.

Niki: Eh, of course, of course I'm better! [Laughs.] Some secrets I don't, I don't give to him. I keep it for myself.

Zahir: Philip and Niki Zias on Long Island, New York...that's all for this episode.

On our website, abetterlifepodcast.com, you'll find some photos of them.

We'll be back in a couple of weeks with another call to an immigrant elder.

Next week, please join us for another installment of A Better Life?...a podcast exploring how Covid-19 is making many immigrants rethink their ideas about the promise of this country.

We want to hear from the immigrant elders in *your* life...how are they doing? And what's bringing them joy in this moment?

Reach out to us on social media and tell us how you're staying connected to them. We're AT Feet in 2 Worlds — that's the number two.

This podcast was produced by Anna Dilena...she's our assistant producer. It was edited by Mia Warren...she's our executive producer. Our audio engineer and senior producer is Jocelyn Gonzales. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Our executive editor is John Rudolph.

Our theme song was composed by Fareed Sajan.

I'm Zahir Janmohamed.

John Rudolph: Call Your Elders and A Better Life? are produced by Feet in 2 Worlds.

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