

Schmitt

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And Niko Bendaj makes those wildly popular bagels himself.

"Niko and I feel incredibly fortunate for the overwhelming support and affection we've received from the community," Becca Bendaj said in March, "surpassing our wildest dreams and expectations."

So how did Niko Bendaj – once on a path to become a general in the Albanian Armed Forces – go from bored with bagels to one of Nashville's best bagel bakers?

Lots of love – and incredible luck in an international lottery.

The journey started in a poor European country next to Greece, one with a population similar to Mississippi's.

Saying 'Bye Bye Bye' to Albania

Bendaj and his family usually ate eggs, cheese, bread and jams for breakfast in their gorgeous waterfront city of Vlore, Albania. His father, who had a tough time finding work nearby, often left for Greece for months at a time to be a craftsman there.

His accountant mom always stressed the importance of education, and Bendaj – whose grandfathers both fought with the Russians against the Nazis in World War II – got accepted into a prestigious military academy after high school.

Throughout his childhood and teen years, Bendaj – like many Albanians – consumed a ton of American music, movies and TV shows. For him, Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync, Britney Spears, Kiefer Sutherland in "24" and Richard Gere in "Pretty Woman" stood out.

"'Bye Bye Bye,' it was a good song," Bendaj said, smiling.

"We never were exposed to American political or domestic problems," he said. "But those movies? America is a great country for me growing up. Albanians, they love America, period, end of story."

As Bendaj continued his military education and training, one of his good friends and classmates beat incredible odds to get a U.S. permanent resident card through a State Department lottery system.

The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program grants green cards to 55,000 heavily-screened people each year from



Niko Bendaj is the owner of the Benji's Bagel & Coffee House, holding up the baked everything bagel, in Nashville, on May 30. PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE AMADOR/THE TENNESSEAN



Niko Bendaj preps everything bagels by placing them on the trays before putting them in the oven on May 30.

countries with low immigration rates to the U.S. Each year, only about 1.6% of the several thousand Albanians who apply each year get a green card.

Bendaj's friend Juxhin (pronounced "Eugene") Shabani got a green card in the late 2000s, and on a return trip to Albania, Shabani encouraged Bendaj to apply to the same U.S. immigrant visa program.

While walking through the city together, Shabani spotted an internet cafe and made a spontaneous suggestion.

"I said, 'Now is the time you apply. Let's apply! Let's do it!'" Shabani said.

"He said OK. It was very random."

Bendaj agreed mostly because he never thought he'd be picked. Bendaj felt strongly about serving his country, like his grandfathers did, like his two uncles did. Plus, he had a girlfriend in Albania, and he liked his life there.

"I never thought about going to America," Bendaj said. "At the end of the day, though, it's America, so why not try it?"

The letter from the State Department arrived at his parents' house while Bendaj was in the military academy two hours away. Shabani went over to the house to read it to Bendaj and translate the letter for his family. Bendaj's parents and grandparents sat around a table watching Shabani make the telephone call to Bendaj.

"Congratulations!" Shabani said to Bendaj in Albanian. "You're coming with me to America!"

Their bagel brunches turned into a dream

Bendaj felt a crash of emotions. He was thrilled about going to the U.S. – but he would be leaving behind his family and his dreams of becoming a general for the Albanian Armed Forces.

"It changes your life in an instant," he said.

It would take two years of health screenings, interviews at the U.S. embassy, paperwork, background checks and more before Bandaj found himself on a plane to JFK airport in New York City with \$500 in his pocket in the summer of 2011. He moved in with cousins he barely knew.

Bendaj enrolled in community college studying accounting and economics and trying not to be overwhelmed by the mass of people, tall buildings and chaos of big-city life.

"The first couple of weeks in U.S., you see so many people, so many faces, and everything is big," he said. "Everything is bigger."

Ten days after he landed, Bandaj got a job as a busboy/food runner in a Spanish restaurant, Salinas, in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. That too would change his life.

Two years later, the restaurant hired a sous chef named Becca, and Bandaj was smitten. Three days later, he asked her if she'd like to shoot billiards with him in a bar inside a nearby hotel.

Becca thought it was a date. Bandaj thought it was two new work buddies

shooting pool. The two sat together talking until 3 a.m. and started dating after that.

Niko Bendaj had his first bagel shortly after that, at a Jewish deli near Becca Bendaj's apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

While he was underwhelmed, he saw that she really loved bagels. Eventually, the two went for some sort of brunch with bagels every weekend.

As his love for Becca grew, so did his love for bagels. And one day in 2016, Bendaj watched a video of YouTube cook/baker Joshua Weissman making bagels. Days later, Bendaj started rolling out bagels in the apartment he shared with Becca. Bendaj got good at it. A year or so later, he and Becca were talking about opening their own bagel shop one day.

That day came in Nashville on Jan. 4, 2024.

After Bendaj had launched a successful career as a financier, managing as much as \$80 million of other people's money. After he and Becca got married. After they moved to Nashville in 2020 to have more room and land for their two kids.

The Bendajes found a spot to rent in a new fancy strip mall in West Nashville's Charlotte Park area. Then he cashed in his 401k savings, and the couple quit their jobs and borrowed tens of thousands more. The two bet everything they had and more on Benji's Bagel & Coffee House, so named for their older craft-loving child.

Sure, Nashville has some good bagel shops – Proper Bagel is the Bendajes' favorite outside of their own.

"But we couldn't find something that we thought, hey, this is the bagel," said Niko Bendaj, now 34.

Many customers think so too. With only a few social media posts, Benji's Bagel drew 300 people on opening day. Since then, staff and customers are building, with the shop selling as many as 850 bagels a day on weekends. He arrives around 4 a.m. to start making bagels, and his wife starts running the shop from behind the cash register a couple of hours later.

"It gives you a sense of fulfillment. I'm happy," he said.

"We spent so much money building this place, but having all these people show up? OK, we are doing something right here. You can't put a price on that."

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