

The Zest Bonus: Tequila Tasting at Lona ===

Alex: [00:00:00] Hey everyone, it's Alex, brand manager of The Zest. We hope you're enjoying our summer series featuring past guests and getting to know what they've been up to since they last spoke to us. Now, this episode is a little bit different. I gave Dalia a much needed break. Lona by Chef Richard Sandoval is located in Tampa's Water Street District and serves up modern Mexican cuisine.

Today, you'll hear from Lona's restaurant manager, Leslie Anthony Rubero, and Chef Pablo Salas, Sandoval's collaborator on Lona. You'll learn everything from their journeys in the food and drink industry to which tequila any novice drinker should start off with. Now, here's my conversations with Leslie Anthony Rubero and Chef Pablo Salas

So Lona known for their tequila program.

Leslie Anthony: Yep.

Alex: Can you tell us a little bit about what makes your tequila program stand out versus everybody else's?

Leslie Anthony: So initially at, at face value, it's the amount of tequilas we have, right? Over 244 tequilas and mezcals [00:01:00] at any given time, right? You could be somebody that's just getting into tequilas and you want to try it out, but you don't wanna spend that high-end ticket value.

You want to- you want the lower price point. Yeah. And we have those, right? So you could, you could really, like, test out what you like, test your taste buds out, see what you enjoy. Then as you start going, you can grow. And we have tequila experts here that can walk you through that whole process. So I think that's what makes it stand out.

Initially, it's the amount of tequilas we have and, um, just the fact that we will sit down and we have different flights. We have our own barrel program- Okay ... with, like, Maestro Dobel and El Tequileno. Um, so just the options is what makes us stick out. I wanna say we have the most in Tampa, but I haven't confirmed that yet.

Alex: I was just about to ask you if you have the most in the city.

Leslie Anthony: I wanna say about... allegedly.

Alex: Allegedly.

Leslie Anthony: Allegedly the most in Tampa.

Alex: Okay. And so for someone who's a tequila novice, kind of like me-

Leslie Anthony: Mm-hmm ...

Alex: like, where do you recommend they start?

Leslie Anthony: So I will always start with a Blanco, right? So if we're looking at this flight here, the- [00:02:00] initially, the Blanco is gonna have more of the, the blue agave taste, right?

'Cause that was only distilled from up to three months, right? And as you go further down the line, you go to the Reposado. Reposado is, was distilled up to 12 months, so it's gonna have more of a richer taste to it, right? And then once you get further to the Añejo, which is one to two years, then it starts to, like, get sweeter and caramelized.

So I would always start with the Blanco, 'cause the Blanco you could also mix with, uh, different ingredients and make your cocktails with, right? That's the one you would wanna do, 'cause it, it's the one that's more pungent, more, more agave tasting, more citrus, like that. So start with that so you can at least get the, the taste of tequila.

Alex: Okay.

Leslie Anthony: And then as you go further down the line... Like, you could make cocktails with the Reposado, but, um, depending on the brand, you might want to drink it over some ice.

Alex: Yeah.

Leslie Anthony: Now, the Añejo, like a bourbon, you wanna drink that over ice and just kind of enjoy it, right? So it's definitely, uh, I would start with the Blanco.

Alex: Okay. And another question I had is obviously the tequila [00:03:00] ages over time in the barrels.

Leslie Anthony: Mm-hmm.

Alex: What is it in the tequila, or is it the barrels that causes it to kinda darken over its aging process? It's both.

Leslie Anthony: It's both, right? So it, it, it, it's, you're distilling it, so there-Traditionally, it's in oak barrels.

So the whole barrel alone and just the age, it, it's, um, tequila comes from like a, it's a blue agave plant. So agave, it's sweet, so it's gonna caramelize or it's gonna start getting sweeter. It's gonna start getting darker. Um, so it, just tequila alone, if you let it sit, will probably get darker. But with the barrel too, you know, barrels.

Some people do it in Chardonnay barrels, so it's a little bit sweeter. Yeah. Um, so it's, it's both. It's technically both, the actual juice- Mm-hmm ... and the barrel making it, makes it get darker. And there's also a process after the anejo, the extra anejo, that they call it the cristalino, that they'll take-

Alex: I've seen that one.

Leslie Anthony: Yes. So they'll take the, the dark tequila and they'll filter it to, like, I wanna say it's cold, but I'm not 100% sure. Uh, and [00:04:00] it'll just kinda take out all the impurities and makes it, makes it clearer. Super

Alex: clear.

Leslie Anthony: But then it's still, like, velvety and rich.

Alex: Yeah.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah.

Alex: Yeah, we did a, I think it was a tequila tasting some years ago over at the Epicurean.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah.

Alex: And they had the cristalino, whatever brand it was, and that was probably the first time I'd ever, like, heard of that variety. Yeah. Because obviously I knew these three.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah.

Alex: But to learn there was, like, one other one.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah, and it's- Yeah ... and that's what's so cool. I, I think what's so cool about tequila, it's so versatile.

Alex: Yeah.

Leslie Anthony: There's so many different ways to drink it, so many different ways, so many different ways you can get it. Like, we were just talking about mezcal. You can get a mezcal. Um, that's smoky, earthier.

Alex: Yeah.

Leslie Anthony: So

Alex: yeah,

Leslie Anthony: it's, I think it's a real versatile spirit.

Alex: Okay. Okay, let's take the first taste.

Leslie Anthony: All right.

Let's- So that's gonna be our blanco. Okay. That is, uh, the process. So the, what the, the process of making tequila is they farm it and then they harvest it, right? So they... I don't know if you've ever seen an agave plant. So in order for it to be tequila, it has to be, uh, blue agave. So I don't know if you've ever seen the agave plant.

It kinda looks like a cactus. Right here in the [00:05:00] picture.

Alex: No, I, I, I went on a cruise to Mexico in 2012, I'll never forget it, and I saw the plant. I didn't realize at the time. I knew agave, I just didn't know all of the things that you could do with agave. Yeah, that's true.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah, so they'll, they'll har- they'll grow that and they, the great agave farmers know when to pull out.

It kinda looks like, um, almost like a pineapple or... You guys, are you guys, uh, Game of Thrones fans? So the, so the dragon eggs. Oh, okay. It kinda looks like a dragon egg. You know, like scaly- Huge, yes ... so they call it the pina. So they take the pina and they'll put it in a horno. Horno is a stone oven and they'll, they'll bake it or roast it, whatever.

So once they do that, they'll juice it. They'll press it to pull all the juice out. Once they take the juice, they ferment it. And then from the fermentation process, they'll put it in, they'll distill it. From that point to three months, and that's what creates the blanco, right? So that's the, that's why I said that's the initial taste.

That's, like, the purest, like, citrusy tequila taste is the blanco. And then we're gonna, gonna move on to the second one. That's gonna be the reposado. That's, they, um, [00:06:00] distill that one up to 12 months. So you can tell, you can see it's a little bit different. It's a little smoother.

Robert: Little... You can see, obviously, the color.

Leslie Anthony: The color's starting to change a little bit, right? Starting to taste some of them oakier notes. Mm-hmm. Right? Now, I will say this about tequila. The funny thing about tequila, you guys have all three lined up, so you'll taste the difference. Of course. But sometimes if you just jump straight to an anejo, you'll be like, "Oh, this tastes just like tequila.

I can't taste the difference."

Robert: Right?

Leslie Anthony: But once, once you have them all lined up, you'll start tasting the difference.

Robert: Absolutely.

Leslie Anthony: So- For sure ... after the 12 months, if they want to, uh, age it longer in the oak barrels from 12 to, uh, three years, that's when you get the anejo. So now you start tasting, like, that caramel.

It's a little smoother, a little velvetier. Those are the ones you'd want to drink over ice.

Robert: Yeah. You

Leslie Anthony: know? Like neat. Neat, yeah. Or neat. Yeah, just like that.

Robert: I remember when I was first, uh, getting into tequila and I was just kinda doing some of the history. Um, I know a lot of times in the States we treat tequila when we're younger as like this thing to take shots with.

Yes. But this is like [00:07:00] their brandy. This is like their whiskey.

Leslie Anthony: Their bourbon. Yeah,

Robert: absolutely. So like everything... I w- at the time I was d- uh, you were drinking, uh, like, those classic drinks like Manhattan and some-

Leslie Anthony: Yeah ...

Robert: Old Fashioned. I was having them do it with anejo since it was kind of the one to one.

Since

Leslie Anthony: that you'd know.

Robert: And so I was like, "Okay, this is pretty interesting." And usually bartenders would love that. Like, "Oh, you're, you're

Leslie Anthony: really tapped in." You understand what's going on. Yeah, you're tapped in. And it's, tequila gets a bad rap, right? 'Cause everybody has that terrible tequila story. But I think that, I, I think that's with any, like-

Robert: Yeah

Leslie Anthony: spirit, right? But for whatever reason, tequila gets that bad rap. But if you get, really get to understand tequila and, like you said, sip it and do like, it's, it's a, it's a great spirit. Great spirit. Beautiful. Yeah, and it's very versatile.

Robert: Yeah.

Alex: If you're enjoying guacamole or any other, like, classic Mexican dish, like, which tequila would you pair with the dish?

So, like, which one would pair well with- Yeah ... guacamole or, I don't know- Yeah ... even churros or something. Yeah,

Leslie Anthony: yeah. So you treat it like, um, almost like wine, [00:08:00] right? So if I was eating something fresh like guacamole, I would go with, like, a blanco. Maybe have, like, a margarita, right? 'Cause you have that citrusy, you have that, um, fresh ingredients that are in the guacamole.

Those would pair well. If I'm going down to the anejo, it's a little richer, so maybe a little richer meal. So maybe steak or, um, some type of carnitas or something like that, right? So and you would treat it the same way. You, uh, at least... Like, I'm not a big wine drinker, but whenever I do drink wine, I kinda follow the color palette.

If I'm eating steak, I'm gonna get a red wine. If I'm eating fish, I'm gonna get a white wine. Same thing here. If you're eating something a little fresher, something a little more citrusy, go ahead and start with the blanco. If you're eating something a little heavier, a little more, um, savory, get yourself an anejo.

Alex: Okay.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah.

Alex: Tell me about your- tequila journey. Like obviously we were just talking, it's like people have those horrible college memories of just, like, taking shots of tequila. When did you realize, okay, tequila isn't that, it can actually be something that's more classy- [00:09:00]

Leslie Anthony: Yes ... if you will? So my, my tequila journey would've started in college, right?

Just going out to get drunk and whatever bottle was the cheapest, drinking that. Once I started working here and just seeing how many different brands there were, and, um, I also noticed before I started working here that, I don't know if you guys remember, like two years ago it was bourbon. Everybody was drinking Old Fashioned.

Bourbons was, like, the new hot thing.

Alex: We was drinking Old

Leslie Anthony: Fashioneds. Bourbon was the... And, wh- which bourbon is a great spirit. Mm. Then I started, I got curious 'cause I started noticing people starting to drink tequila as a little different, right? Yeah. We weren't, we weren't just taking the shots. They were getting tequila on ice.

Mm-hmm. And then like, but I remember tequila as you taking shots and get- Yeah ... getting wasted- Yeah ... and it wasn't a good time. Started to notice, I started seeing that shift, and then once I started working here and seeing just the different brands and just understanding that there, there's a, it sounds kind of cliché and corny, there's a tequila out there for me, right, is when I really started my journey.

And now I, um, now I enjoy it as my preferred spirit.

Alex: That's awesome.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah.

Alex: Would you say you're an expert on tequila?

Leslie Anthony: No. No? It's just... No. And I, I-

Alex: You're not there yet?

Leslie Anthony: I'm not there yet. I've only been here eight months, [00:10:00] and there's just so much to tequila. Just like, it's like saying being an expert just feels like being, like, a sommelier in wine.

Yeah. There's just so much. And I'm sure that it's like that for every spirit.

Alex: Yeah. So you're still learning.

Leslie Anthony: Still learning.

Alex: Yeah.

Leslie Anthony: Yeah. Still learning, and that's the fun part.

Alex: So thank you for- Thank you very

Leslie Anthony: much ...

Alex: taking your time out of the day, out of the evening, to, uh, to walk us through the tequilas and kind of educate us on what pairs well with it.

This was fun.

Leslie Anthony: Thank you very

Alex: much.

Leslie Anthony: Pleasure.

Chef Pablo: So we have here the avocados. We need to have a ripe avocado.

Alex: And do you get your avocados from Mexico or-

Chef Pablo: Yeah ... elsewhere? With our avocado hash.

Alex: Okay.

Chef Pablo: And, uh, that's it.

Alex: So what are the keys to making- The key- ... a good guacamole?

Chef Pablo: The key I always say is, like, to do your puree by, by their self. [00:11:00] Don't add any other in- any, any other ingredient because you are gonna add juices, because we are gonna press it.

Yeah. We're gonna make like a puree. So I think that's the main secret.

Alex: Okay.

Chef Pablo: And then we're gonna start.

Alex: Yeah, that looks nice to grind. Oh my goodness.

Chef Pablo: We do this obviously in big quantity. Of course. But we use, uh, you know, those for, for the beans and- Yeah ... yeah ... the big, like, mortar and pestle. Yeah.

Alex: Yeah.

Chef Pablo: Yeah.

Alex: Just you, you

Chef Pablo: keep smash it until however you want, if you really want. I'm gonna add a little bit of acidity. Okay. So we don't get-

Robert: Gotta have that.

Alex: There's so many, like, regional varieties of guacamole. Like, which one do you think should get more time, and which one do you think people are probably more surprised to learn about?

Uh,

Chef Pablo: I love the one we have here, the, uh, the one with crab.

Robert: The [00:12:00] lump crab. I saw

Chef Pablo: that. Yeah, the lump crab. Yeah, I think it's pretty good, but we're gonna

do this like a traditional with a little twist.

Alex: Okay. That sounds good. Lump crab and guacamole, I don't think I've ever had that. Yeah. I think I would feel very fancy.

Chef Pablo: Then I always say my favorite ingredient is salt.

Alex: Of course. You gotta have the salt, yes.

Chef Pablo: Because I say to my cooks, like, we're not cooking in a hospital lab.

Alex: Yeah. Yeah.

Chef Pablo: I'm, I'm respectful, but you, you know, in the hospital they say, "No salt, no sugars." Yeah. And I say- So do you

Alex: like your guac more salty?

Chef Pablo: Uh, yeah.

Alex: Yeah.

Chef Pablo: Then I'm gonna add the pico de gallo with a little bit of the juices
Then we're gonna add chili

Alex: Okay ...

Chef Pablo: but it's seedless, so, uh, ba- basically it's not really, um, spicy.

Alex: Yeah.

Chef Pablo: Bit of cilantro. You like cilantro?

Alex: Yes.

Chef Pablo: Okay. Then [00:13:00] we're gonna plate it.

Alex: Okay.

Chef Pablo: Okay? Perfect.

Alex: Perfect.

Chef Pablo: I think we're ready.

Alex: And then the corn and-

Chef Pablo: And the cheese- Yes ... and the bacon is gonna be on top. So that's how we plate it

Alex: usually. Usually how much guacamole does the team make in a day? 'Cause I know it's not, it, it can't be this much.

Chef Pablo: No, no. We make maybe, on a busy day, maybe, like, five to six, uh, cases.

Alex: Oh, wow. That's a lot. Okay.

Chef Pablo: Every case has 24 avocados. Okay. So like six times four is 24.

Alex: It's like, ooh.

Chef Pablo: Like almost 150 avocados.

Alex: Okay. That's a lot. Yeah. That's a lot.

Chef Pablo: Yeah, maybe a little more sometimes. It's, it, I think it's [00:14:00] the best seller here in- Yeah ... you know, in Mexican restaurant.

Alex: Of course. You, you can't go to a Mexican restaurant and not get, like-

Chef Pablo: Yeah ...

Alex: chips and salsa or chips and guac. Like-

Chef Pablo: Yeah.

Alex: The plating is so intricate. I love it.

Chef Pablo: They would put, this is cilantro sprouts

Alex: Yeah I like little sprouts on things. So can you explain, uh, what Mex- And let me know if I'm pronouncing it correctly. Is it Mexiquense?

Chef Pablo: Mexiquense.

Alex: Mexiquense, okay. Oh, yeah. Okay. Can you explain what Mexiquense is- Yes ... for the unfamiliar?

Chef Pablo: Yeah. Okay. Okay. I'm Mexiquense because I'm from the State of Mexico.

A, a, a State of Mexico is a state that surrounds Mexico City, and they call it, like, that Mexiquenses. Like, you know, in, in Mexico they call it Chilangos. Mm-hmm. You know that? We are Mexiquenses, and you know, the, maybe

the guys from the, from Sonora, they are Sonorenses. Yeah. And we are from the State of Mexico.

That's, that's my, my state. I think it's the most, uh, populated state.

Alex: In the entire country?

Chef Pablo: Yeah.

Alex: Wow.

Chef Pablo: Yeah, like, more than Mexico City.

Alex: Really? Yeah. I didn't know that. Yeah. Well, this is my first time learning that there's a state called Mexico- yes ... in the country of Mexico. Yeah. Wow. Okay.

Chef Pablo: And then to finish just this, I'm gonna use part of this fish and chips.

The fish and chips. Chips and salsa. That's fine. Mm-hmm.

Alex: And so, like, how do you think your Mexiquense heritage kind of influenced your cooking?

Chef Pablo: I, I, I, I start doing, uh, cocina Mexiquense or Mexican cocina Mexiquense because there is a lot of vegetables. There's a lot of diversity in Mexico. So I, I was like, I didn't even know my, my own state- Yeah

when I start, like, doing this, like, as, as a chef. I start doing some research around my, my, my state and I say, "We need to put Mexico in, in the top- Yeah ... of the gastronomy." I think we have a lot of diversity, and everybody say, "Eh, Mexico is corn and chili." Yeah. But no, we have a lot of diversity. We have two oceans.

We have two peninsulas. I say, I need to do something with the, with my own cuisine, because nobody's doing something about that. You can hear a lot, uh, you can hear a lot about Oaxacan cuisine. Right. Merida cuisine or those states, but never cuisine from the state of Mexico. Yeah. And that's the cuisine that I'm making, it's co- me- cocina [00:15:00] [00:16:00] [00:17:00] mexiquense.

Alex: So, like, how would you describe Mexiquense cuisine? Is it, like, really kind of, like, fresh vegetable base, or is it, like, meats and whatever?

Chef Pablo: It's, it's a lot of, uh, fresh vegetables like you, like you just said. Um, uh, and we use a lot of pork. We use a lot of pork on the, on the steak.

Alex: Mm-hmm.

Chef Pablo: Uh, we do a lot of, uh, I don't know how you say in English, but embutidos.

Mm. Like, um, charcuterie.

Alex: Okay.

Chef Pablo: Yeah. We do a lot of that. But, uh, we are really famous but of the, of, of the chorizo. We have red chorizo, green chorizo, habanero chorizo, chorizo with tamarind.

Alex: Ooh.

Chef Pablo: Chorizo with, uh, red wine. So we're really famous w- for that. And, [00:18:00] and we, and now the steak is growing. Lona is a res- um, Mexican restaurant that try to keep it, like, the most original possible to the Mexican recipes.

That's why I'm working with Chef Richard, that's why he invite me, like, to do, uh, traditional but at the same time modern presentations. And just invite people to come to know us, to know Lona, and have a good time.

Alex: That was Leslie Anthony Rivera and Chef Pablo Salas of Lona. You can see photos of the restaurant on The Zest Facebook and Instagram, @thezest-podcast.

I'm Alexandria Ebron, the brand manager, and I produce The Zest with Dalia Colon and Andrew Lucas.