

The Zest S13E3

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Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon and this is The Zest: Citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Today a food podcast with a unique perspective.

Figuring out what to eat can sometimes feel like a relentless chore. Can I get an amen? And for people on the autism spectrum, mealtimes can be even more challenging from food diversions to noisy restaurants to feeling ostracized because of what or how they eat. Today we're digging deeper with the co-hosts of the Autistic Delicatessen.

It's a food podcast that centers the voices of adults with a [00:01:00] neurodivergent perspective. Now, I was privileged to meet the show's producer and co-host Larnell Cross. At a podcasting workshop in Tampa. In this conversation, Larnell and I are joined by autistic delicatessen co-hosts, Shalese Heard, and Candi Carpenter.

There are also a handful of other co-hosts that you'll hear when you follow the autistic delicatessen. Wherever you're listening to this podcast, go ahead and give it a follow. Right now. Actually in this conversation, Larnell, Shalese and Candi share why food is a natural conversation starter for people with or without autism.

They also discuss why some people on the spectrum have aversions to certain foods or food textures, and they talk about how restaurants can be more inclusive. So whether you're on the autism spectrum or you love someone who is settle in for this candid conversation.

Candi: I just wanna show people that autistic folks like myself can do whatever they [00:02:00] want to the expectations that folks, I'm a millennial, I'm an elder millennial.

Dalia: Same. Same.

Candi: I grew up the same way with that, you know, internalized ableism that we were taught. And not really understanding myself, not really understanding autism, not really understanding what it meant to be a disabled person.

And as I've grown and. Learn more and more. You know, we just shouldn't be ashamed of who we are. That's something that's taught to us. That's not how we are naturally entering this world. We don't come into this life, you know, feeling burdened by who we are. And I didn't really think of myself as bold because I just am blunt, I guess.

But I keep hearing that. So it must be. But really I'm just trying to tell my story and no one else is, 'cause I can't speak for other autistic or non-binary folks. I can only tell my [00:03:00] story. So that's what I'm hoping to do.

Dalia: I'm so glad you brought that up because I've heard the saying, you know, if you've met one person with autism, then you've met one person.

One

Candi: person. With autism. With autism.

Dalia: Yeah. So I wanna start with you, Larnell, for my next question, but then Candi and Shalese, you weigh in. If you've had a different experience, what are maybe some of the complications or challenges when it comes to food that a neurotypical person may not deal with? And this might be hard for you to answer because you've only ever been yourself, but I'm thinking in terms of like cooking or food aversions or going out to a restaurant or grocery shopping.

Have you picked up on any differences that you realized? Aren't as difficult for other people?

Larnell: Well, I just think for me, um, when I was a kid, my parents had me on a special diet to where I couldn't have certain red dyes and certain, um, types of sugars. So I had to get stuff from like the health food store, you know.

So I remember like when I used to live in South Florida [00:04:00] and when I was a kid, my parents would take me over to the Unicorn Village and Market and get all this stuff over there. And I remember some of it would be tofu stuff. There would be like soy milk, all that stuff. At times, like I would just feel like I was so different.

I was so other because, you know, I was early diagnosed and for that it was just about not only navigating myself with other people, but also navigating myself with food. And then also trying to explain to certain teachers and explain to certain people, oh, I can't have this because I am this, you know, and you know, because, um, my parents got it from a certain book about like.

You know, behavioral type stuff. It's kind of like if you give an autistic person sugar, then they just go nuts or whatever. Mm-hmm. So, so that's kind of like another way of, um, looking at it. But otherwise than that, years later I can be able to have different types of, um. Things though, you know, and not really have any types of, um, aversions.

[00:05:00] And I know every autistic person is very different though. So I think for me, certain things have helped. And then other things, like, look at it this way, it got me to be open to having vegetarian meals and vegan meals because if not, then I would've been very like, pushed off by that and thought, Ugh, what's that stuff?

You know? So, you know, I have a balance between meat and organic stuff so I can be able to navigate through that though.

Dalia: Very cool. And if I'm not mistaken, I believe Candi, you mentioned that you're a vegetarian too.

Candi: I would be dishonest to say fully vegetarian. I am, I guess, sort of what they call a flexitarian.

I, I don't eat very much meat. I really, I can't, I can't with chicken or like poultry, uh, especially, but freely on, like, on occasion I'll have a piece of fish or something, but, but. Pretty much vegetarian. Um,

Dalia: okay. We'll take it.

Candi: I do love my cheese and my eggs though.

Dalia: Yeah. Oh, those are really hard to give up.

Yes. Okay. Candi, what's been your experience in terms of [00:06:00] eating? Have you noticed anything that maybe other friends and family members don't deal with that's more difficult for you? Whether it's cooking at home, going grocery shopping. Ordering food in a restaurant, anything like that?

Candi: Well, something that's very often comorbid with autism is something called ARFID, which is avoidant, restrictive food intake disorder.

And um, it's sometimes just really tough for me to eat certain things. It kind of depends. I can't really plan it. Um, sometimes I'm just not hungry and I know I need to be and I want to be. It's difficult to chew and swallow whatever's in front of me, even if it looks delicious and I want to, thankfully that is not something that happens all the time, but, um.

I find that my tastes sort of change and shift and I'll eat like one comfort meal every day for like a month, and then suddenly I never wanna have that thing again as long as I live. [00:07:00] Like I, I dunno if you had, for me growing up, like my mom got so tired of taking me through Taco Bell to get a crunch wrap Supreme, that she just put all of the ingredients to make my own in the fridge and it was just crunch wrap Supreme.

Every day for months and then. I don't think I've really ever had one since. Um, I, I still have, I still have a great taco. I still have great nacho. But

Dalia: Why do you think that is? Because I had a family member who is on the spectrum. He's an adult now, but I can remember when he was, I don't know, like two or three.

His thing was Chinese food, like fried rice.

Shalese: Oh, that was my thing.

Dalia: Oh, Shalese. Okay. I'm coming to you next. Shalese get ready. But I just remember him having the biggest meltdown. And I, I'm trying not to give away his identity, but I just remember him having the biggest meltdown and his parents who are my relatives saying like, we have to find some Chinese food because [00:08:00] we were not in their hometown.

We have to find Chinese food. And then other family members saying like, it's not that big of a deal. You just, you eat what he. Whatever he put you put in front of him, that's what the kid has to eat. And they were like, no, you don't understand. Like this is his comfort. This is what's familiar to him. He's not going to relent until he gets his Chinese food.

So Shalese, what's been your experience? It may not have been crunch wrap Supreme, it may not have been Chinese, you know, fried rice, but um, what's

been your experience with eating differently from other people maybe. And what do you think it is about that comfort food that's so important?

Shalese: Okay, so that Chinese food has a lot of layers to it.

And I'm gonna just let you know that the reason autistic travel got us even started to begin with is because I used to have a special interest for countries and you know, traveling the world. And every year it seemed like I would have a new country to be obsessed with. That particular year, I was obsessed with China and I always wanted to have stir fry [00:09:00] because of that.

Another thing that I wanted to touch on as well is the way that I eat differently than people around me. It has to do with textures, for instance. I can't get around anything I, I can't understand or relate to eat anything that's too mushy. I like my pasta cooked very specifically, like almost to the point where it's not cooked, like almost al dente to the point where it's still uncooked.

Because anything over that feels too mushy to me, and it just gives me a nauseated feeling if it's too mushy. And I got a lot of flack growing up because of, you know, the fact that I didn't want to eat starches like other people in my family, they kept saying that I was too picky, that I was, you know, thinking I was too good to eat certain things, but they didn't understand that it was an autism texture thing.

For instance, bread was another thing I struggled to eat. Something that's really interesting to talk about that's kind of embarrassing actually, is if food has certain letters to it, because I have synesthesia to where [00:10:00] certain letters make me feel uncomfortable, and if food has certain, like if the label of the food has certain letters on it, then eating it will make me feel nauseated.

Dalia: Like what?

Shalese: Like for instance, um, McDonald's, for some reason the letter M makes me feel nauseated and so that's why I can't eat McDonald's.

Dalia: I can't eat McDonald's either for other reasons. Okay.

Candi: Same. I'd like to weigh in and also agree on that. No,

Dalia: shade,

if McDonald's wants to sponsor this podcast, we're here for it, but um, okay.

Larnell, I'm gonna go back to you. What about just the interactions with other people? You think about going to a restaurant and it's. It can be overwhelming for anyone. It can be loud in there. Mm-hmm. You have to talk to the server you're interacting with, you know, the, the bus person and the other people at your table.

Is that ever a challenge for you? It's a challenge for me, and I'm not on the autism spectrum.

Larnell: Not, not really. Yeah, because, 'cause whenever I get a menu on a table, I [00:11:00] just say, um, okay, this is what I would like and. Basically I would just say, oh, I would like this and I would like that, and I would just make sure I'm just clear about it, you know, and when I was younger it was more of, I was kind of shy, so it was kind of like a nerve wracking thing.

But otherwise than that, if I'm clear about something, it's more of, okay, um, I would like to have this and take this off and have this right there. So, um, it really hasn't been much of a problem for me.

Dalia: Okay. Candi, what about you?

Candi: I struggle with socializing sometimes. I think because we're inundated all, we always have, I always say it's a party in our pocket, like social media is a party that we can never leave, and so.

Everyone from neurodivergent to neurotypical. Folks like we are always inundated with social pressure. Everybody can text whenever they want to, an email. There are so many different [00:12:00] ways that people communicate at us all the time. So, you know, you were saying diya. It can be stressful for you to go to a restaurant.

Being an realistic person, of course, we're, we are all socially exhausted. For, for myself as an autistic person, my social bandwidth fluctuates. Um, and then with that, sometimes so does my. S ability to, uh, give a good interview. For instance, um, today I'm really struggling with my words. On other days, I don't.

In the past, I would cancel interviews on days when I was struggling to think of what I wanted to say and articulate it the way that I wanted to, and now I don't anymore because being an openly autistic person, I want to be. Show people the, the full picture of what this experience is like. And you know, there it's something they call, um, spiky skill sets.

And [00:13:00] one of my spiky skill sets, one of one of my areas where I need more support needs is sometimes in. Communication. I think that's why I started writing songs, because you can take as long as you need to to write that song and think about what you wanna say. Uh, but you can't necessarily take all the time, you want to not have an awkward interaction with the waiter at the restaurant.

Dalia: Oh, well if this is you on a, an off day, then you're amazing.

Shalese, what about you? Have you had so sweet, um, interpersonal issues when it comes to eating? Because eating is such a social activity, you know.
[00:14:00]

Shalese: Yeah, so I know for me, you know, being a traveler and going into the restaurants, if the restaurant is too loud, if it's too noisy or if it's too many bright lights or in the environment, it's just too much.

That'll actually turn me off from wanting to eat there. And even with socially, you know, eating around other people, like let's say I have a group of friends that invite me out to eat, or I'm meeting with family, sometimes I feel embarrassed by the fact that, you know, the way that I eat. That I tend to either try to hide it or I don't want to overly voice it just because it feels embarrassing to me because I've been shamed for it in the past.

Dalia: What do you mean? How are you eating? That's different from how the other people are eating.

Shalese: So one time I'll never forget family members, they laughed and made fun of me one time because I'm the type of person that eats instead of going around. I didn't know that it was normal to go around and eat different things on your plate at the same time.

I would eat one thing at a time. Like I would not touch [00:15:00] my, my chicken until my peas were done, and then so on and so forth. And everyone else, they would eat their peas, they would eat their chicken, they would eat their mashed potatoes, one bite after each other. Me, I would just finish one thing and then go to the next.

Dalia: Mm-hmm.

Shalese: And I got made fun for that.

Dalia: Wow. And,

Shalese: and that was the first time I realized that not everyone eats methodically like I do.

Larnell: It makes me think about when I was eating special foods, like on special diets and having to go to restaurants and not having the restaurants ketchup or even the mayonnaise.

I would have nail na, which is like a soy version of Mayo, and then I would have more of like the ketchup from the health food store there, just like having in condiments or something. Even at functions or even at family reunion, sometimes I'll be kind of like feeling like, man, like, or even at school, like I would think to myself like, man, like I can't eat like what the other kids see.

And I'll feel embarrassed and I'll feel like an outcast. 'cause I was already socially an outcast trying to fit in. But now with the Eden, [00:16:00] I couldn't have that. 'cause that's why certain times I would sneak certain things because I was already a shy kid. But I wanted to also fit in so badly. So I wanted to have what the other neurotypical kids had.

'cause I didn't want to feel left out though. So I can understand where Shalese is coming from in some ways.

Dalia: Aw, I just wanna give baby Larnell a big hug. I get that. And isn't it, isn't it crazy how the thing that you try to hide as a kid ends up becoming like your superpower? And I'm even thinking about the gluten-free kids who can't have a cupcake or the kids with diabetes and you know, just so many layers to it.

So then you go from that hiding and sneaking your, your food, which was. Healthier anyway, it sounds like to now. Mm-hmm. Sort of celebrating your autism while also highlighting your love of food. So before I let you go, I have to ask like. How do you do a podcast? And I, I wanna know from all of you because sometimes I get nervous.

How are you [00:17:00] approaching doing this podcast, reviewing food in a very public way?

Larnell: Well, for me it's because it's an interest and one of the things I realized through the different seasons. With the different co-hosts and different

people, like even different guests on the show, like, 'cause we have guests that are on the spectrum as well as off.

We've talked to people that have food, businesses, music and food. We've also had people that talk about food and social justice, you know, and I think that it's very important to really have those type of moments in the show because like I'm something that my former co-hosts only would say is food brings people together?

Which is so true. You know, and that's why the ending tagline, we would have something about like, um, what's on your plate is how we relate. And the reason why I, I, I put it there, I originally wrote that is because food is a very interesting thing. And plus you can learn about different cultures, you know, as well as learn about different perspectives on things.

And for me, like I came from a broadcasting school, so I always try to learn from my shows because I've done. [00:18:00] Music and arts and, and, um, storytelling podcasts in the past, you know, called inoculate expressions. I did inoculate radio, I did inoculation. These were all music podcasts and then I went into food, you know, so I feel like food is kind of like doing a music podcast in some ways because like the texture and all that type of stuff, it's like the feelings of food can feel like that.

And also. Food can also bring about social change and talk about very serious things. You know, in terms of some of the episodes that you've seen and all stuff. Even, even with like Will Schanbacher who was one of the guests on the past episode.

Dalia: For sure, and he was also a guest on the Zest. He's Will Schanbacher from, uh, the Food Sovereignty Initiative at USF.

Okay. Our time is short. My puppy is barking and she probably wants me to give her some attention. But before we go, I have to ask you guys for your recommendations, like what are you excited about in terms of food or a restaurant that you tried and you want everyone to know about, or an ingredient, just a trend that you're seeing.

Candi: Well, I've been just [00:19:00] dying to say this ever since she's last answer. I just wanna say this to every restaurant in the world, please invest in excellent acoustic sound treatment because Thank you. When there's just sound reverberating. All over your restaurant. It is. It's not pleasant for anyone. Please just get some acoustic sound panels.

Just do something. Don't look for that. Yeah, we all want that, but I am very excited to go back to Sean Brock's restaurant husk as soon as possible because they have a vegetable plate there that goes crazy. Every time I go with my carnivore friends, they are so jealous. Of my vegetable plate because every day a chef at a different station at Husk designs the vegetable side dish and it comes out and there's like a fresh bowl of these, like five crazy sides, and it's never the same.

It's [00:20:00] so good. Please check out Husk. I would like to go right now, but I can't. I would like

Dalia: to go with you. Where is it by the way,

Candi: you're It's in Nashville, Tennessee.

Dalia: Okay. That's where you live and all the other hosts are in Florida. Correct.

Candi: And I'm jealous of them because I'm very cold today.

Larrnell: So actually,

Candi: actually it's so raining, cold,

Larrnell: actually.

Actually, Dalia, I'm in Florida and Shalese in Georgia.

Dalia: Oh, okay, great. Yeah. Shalese, I'm coming to you. And then finally, Larrnell, um, Shalese, what are you excited about? What are you recommending? And I know I'm putting you all on the spot, so. I went to

Shalese: Oregon this past fall, and I discovered something called Marionberry yogurt.

And so Marion Berry, it's nothing. It's actually a hybrid between a huckleberry and a Blackberry. I would say it's sweeter than huckleberry and blackberries on our own. And there's this brand. So the brand that makes this Marion Berry yogurt is called Ellenos. You could find it in Whole Foods, but. A lot of stores in Portland, like practically every store in Portland has it.

Yum. And

Dalia: learn now. How about you? [00:21:00]

Larnell: Well, um, I just, um, recently went to this grand opening of a Korean rice bowl place called. BiBimGo or something. Um, it's along with like mochi nuts, which they have like these Korean type of like Asian donuts there, you know. And um, it's on Sierra Center Boulevard in Wesley Chapel in Lutz.

So like, um, that's a good place. They have really good Korean rice bowls and they had a really good like mochi nut donut because I've been to Mooching Nut before. You know, there was, there was another place in Tampa, but it's really good. They have these very nice donuts. I had the like, um, strawberry and chocolate donut.

I'm sure you've seen some of the pictures on my, um, Instagram though. So it's just, it's really good. And the Korean rice bowl, I had a mixture of like sweet potato noodles. I had fried egg on it. I had some dumplings mixed in with it. I had some white rice on it. It's a really good place. You know, we just opened, it's on Sierra Center Boulevard, you know, it's around the Tampa area.

Check, check that out. So

Dalia: amazing. I wanna [00:22:00] have a meetup with all three of you in a, in a restaurant with good acoustics, and we'll get a fish plate and we'll share it and we'll get some donuts and it'll just. Be great. Thank you all so much for your time. I really enjoyed this conversation and I just want to say that I appreciate you being so open about your experience, so this was, this was great and I'm really honored that you took the time to talk to me.

Shalese: Thanks for having us.

Larnell: Yeah, thanks

Shalese: Dalia.

Larnell: Yeah, thanks so much, Dalia. We really appreciate it.

Dalia: You've been hearing from the co-hosts of The Autistic Delicatessen. That's Larnell Cross, Candi Carpenter and Shalese Heard in addition to the other co-hosts, and I know you already followed it, but if you didn't, go ahead and do that right now.

It's The Autistic Delicatessen. Thank you so much, Larnell, Candi, and Shalese. I really enjoyed this conversation. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF copyright 2026, part of the NPR [00:23:00] network.