

The Zest S13E19

Nihat: [00:00:00] I always say this, like, drink is important, you know? Uh, what we provide is very important in terms of cocktails, but service is also very important. People, they don't remember the drinks, they remember the feelings.

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, let's raise a glass to the hotel bar.

A hotel bar is much more than just a place to grab a drink while you're on vacation or traveling for work. It's about connection, relaxation, and rituals as old as mankind. And a really good hotel bar will even attract the locals. That's the case at The Tampa EDITION, which is a five-star hotel located on downtown's bustling Channelside Drive.

Throughout the EDITION's bars and restaurants, service is as important as what's in the glass. And here to ensure that that hospitality is [00:01:00] center stage is The Tampa EDITION's director of bars, Nihat Çam. We sat down with Nihat at the hotel's Punch Room Speakeasy, which is so nice. Over virgin hibiscus cocktails, he shared how his Turkish upbringing and global travels led him to this role.

He also talks about the latest trends in alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages for those of you teetotalers, and he discusses the larger role that hotel bars play in society, something I had never thought about, but that Nihat details in his book called *Bar Culture: Hospitality, Hotel Bars and Spirits*.

So here's our conversation with Nihat Çam.

Nihat: So right now we're in the Punch Room. This is our speakeasy, uh, cocktail lounge, where we offer a bespoke cocktail experience. Usually our operation is, uh, Wednesday through Saturday. It's just a great evening bar for our guests at the hotel and for [00:02:00] also locals in the city.

Dalia: Very cool. Okay, so there are three total bar spaces in the hotel?

Nihat: So actually, we have a little bit more than that. We have Punch Room. Next door facing here we have Arts Club. Uh, downstairs we have Lobby Bar.

These are kind of like the bar-bar or bar/lounge pieces that we have. At the same time, we have our Michelin star restaurant, uh, Lilac. We have a coffee bar. We have the restaurant Market, uh, which is the Italian all-day dining restaurant where we offer, uh, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

And we have the rooftop, ninth floor, Azure. And we have the pool outside. So we have a little bit more than that when it comes to offering food and beverage features for the city.

Dalia: Okay. Let's talk about hotel bars. My husband travels a lot for work, and he loves to eat dinner at the bar. What is the role of a hotel bar?

Nihat: I think, uh, [00:03:00] th- it's been part of the scene for a long time. Uh, obviously, there's a lot of standalone bars out there. There is different purpose bars where they have, like, um, event catering, uh, standalone bars, and hotel bars, and, and more and more. But the hotels, uh, they've been kinda like doing this for a long time, and, uh, I think the, the, it, it came with the purpose, right?

You have a lot of, uh, uh, travelers today, uh, in the world, and I think hotel bars, they also started to become a destination as well as the hotel itself, right? So you s- you see a lot of travelers going to specific locations just to see that bar or the hotel, so they play a huge role today in the industry.

Dalia: Well, you mentioned your book. Congratulations. Thank you. It came out earlier this year. It's called *Bar Culture: Hospitality, Hotel Bars, and Spirits*. Mm-hmm. And the description that I read online, it said the book explores the hotel bar, not simply as a place to drink, but as a cultural [00:04:00] crossroads where travelers- Mm-hmm locals, rituals, and spirits meet. So what's the vibe here at the EDITION? Do you get a lot of locals coming in? Why would someone who lives here come to a hotel bar as opposed to any other bar in town?

Nihat: From our side, for the, the hotel, we are very heavy on the food and beverage side, right? Um, if you look at the other, um, brands or, like, locations, you see maybe some properties are focusing on, uh, banquet services, right?

Or some properties are, they, they have, like, more than 500 rooms or 1,000 rooms. Some hotels, they have more than 2,000 rooms, right? Resort locations, city locations, and, and so on. I think our goal is to provide this bespoke experience when it comes to bars to the city, where we offer more than, uh, multiple bars.

You have to be kinda like a local ambassador for the city to kinda, like, lead that role, right? There are, like, really great bars out there in Tampa and St. Pete put together, but I [00:05:00] think it's been a little bit more than three years now for us. And, uh, since then, uh, the bar team's dedicated, passion bar team, they did an amazing job to, uh, lead that for the city, where we have daily relationships with the, the people from the, the city, and they become our everyday guest for the, you know, for our drinks.

Dalia: That's cool. So how can the bar help to shape the culture of the city? I mean, you, you brought over this hibiscus cocktail that's gorgeous. It's, like, this ruby red color. It does feel very Florida, and it does- Seem like what someone would expect to drink when they come here. I don't know what's in it, so maybe it's unexpected.

But how does the bar scene translate to the wider culture of the town? I

Nihat: think bars, uh, overall, uh, the beverages, uh, beyond bars, I think they've been part of the, uh, human history for such a long time, right? And, uh, fundamentally, we have to have water every day, tea every day, [00:06:00] coffee every day, right? It was always there, but bars we needed for our essential, uh, daily purposes.

With that being said, you have to have a little bit fun, right? You have, uh, a moment for yourself. It might be a little, a sad moment, it might be a little happy moment, it might be a celebration, it might be just gathering, it might be a wedding, it might be anything, right? So for those purposes, people always tend to go somewhere together for that purpose.

And I think bars kinda like, uh, helping that purpose for a long time, uh, for thousand years.

Dalia: Alright, tell me about the hibiscus drink that you just set over here. What's in that, and what are maybe some of the other popular drinks on the menu? You, you're now holding the menu- Yes ... so that's perfect. So

Nihat: I moved here, I think it was 2022, and 2023, uh, we teamed up with, uh, Tural, who's the director of beverage for the, the property.

We wanted to do something local, and I think when we moved, we [00:07:00] wanted to do something special for, uh, the place that we live in. And with that being said, we live in, uh, North America, so that offers a lot of, uh, good

ingredients and stories that you can put together. So for our menu, actually we wanted to call it Americas, and the journey is actually North America.

So that is a journey that starts from, uh, the very south of the, uh, the place, uh, obviously the continent is, uh, Mexico. And your journey goes up to, uh, US, and you end up ending your journey in, uh, Canada. And each place, each region you travel, you find a very traditional product that is associated with the region for a long time, right?

Give you an example. Mexico, when you think of Oaxaca, the very first thing you think of is probably a mezcal, because that's kinda like, you know, the, the perception of the, the region when it comes to bars and the spirits. Uh, when you travel to Jalisco, the very first thing [00:08:00] you probably think of is tequila.

Yep. So every drink that we put it for each region is associated with this traditional perception of the region and the traditional product. And for Jalisco, for example, we did a margarita, uh, with, because it's tequila focus, uh, region. For hibiscus, that's actually on our menu called Virgen, uh, which is virgin in, uh, Spanish.

And each region comes with one non-alcoholic cocktail offer. And for Mexico it was hibiscus because, uh, hibiscus is huge in, uh, Mexico. I was able to travel and see in person. And, uh, what we wanted to do is we wanted to give you the sense of the actual region with the ingredients that comes from that region because they, they grow together, right?

When they grow together, it makes sense. Uh, they, they link, they sync. So hibiscus was a, was a huge ingredient for us to use, especially in a, a non-alcoholic cocktail where we actually force [00:09:00] carbonated the entire drink with sun-dried Mexican chili peppers, a little bit, uh, dem sugar. Then we basically made our mixer from the, the hibiscus and carbonated, because everyone loves, uh, carbonated drinks actually.

That's one of the reasons, I guess. Champagne is very popular, right? It's because it's approachable. We wanted our non-alcoholic drinks to be a little bit more than just juices, right? I think in my opinion, you need a strong body, sometimes protein, sometimes citrus, sometimes a very well structure to kinda like reflect your idea on the non-alcoholics.

It's, it's beyond juices. So for us, uh, we use a little bit more than that just to make sure we, uh, we do something different for the city.

Dalia: That's so cool. I have a hibiscus bush at home, and I'm trying to make my own tea. It's not going well, but [00:10:00] you're giving me hope.

I love the journey through the Americas. It's reminding me of, like, Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime show where he lists every country in the Americas. Okay, and I also love that you have non-alcoholic offerings because there are a lot of people who don't drink or don't want to drink as much as they are.

What do you think a bar does for people? Because if they're not just going there for the alcohol, and we have plenty of, you know, places around here where you can get your own supplies to mix your own drinks at home. So yes, a bartender is, uh, mixing drinks for people, but what else are they bringing to the table that keeps people coming back?

Nihat: I think it's connections. Um, it's... I think emotional piece is very important. A lot of, uh, guests, they go there for service, sometimes some-maybe a tangible [00:11:00] product, right? Uh, you go for a glass of something. Sometimes you just go for a good time. Sometimes you just go for to rest. I seen people going to bars and reading books.

I seen people, they go just to get fun, dance, right? I seen people, they go just to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. What I'm saying, I think it's, um, it's emotional, uh, engagement piece is very important, uh, because you would probably not go back to a bar where you feel emotionally disengage.

And you're going to the same bar often, and you connect with people, right? The, the person that you saw a couple of nights ago on the bar counter tonight becomes your friend where you can actually talk about something, right? The bartender you talk to becomes a regular that you can actually share whatever you're going through, right?

I think it's a great, uh, session. It's like a, a therapy. It's very important that the emotional piece is there because you're looking for a reason to go back. I think there was couple of special [00:12:00] bars that I had that feeling that made me go back because they made me feel, like, happy in that s- second that I was sipping my drink.

Uh, so there was couple of examples around the world that I had that feeling, yeah.

Dalia: Ooh, around the world? Okay, you gotta tell me where.

Nihat: I'm Turkish. I was born in Turkey, and I think there was a couple of places that in Turkey made it super, uh, traditional, uh, where we have the Aegean and the Mediterranean side that I go back and, um, by the water, you just enjoy, enjoy the scene.

Uh, but to give you an example from actually the city that we live in, there's, uh, Bar Mezzo in, uh, St. Pete. Amazing team. Hospitality's at best every time, uh, I go back there. Uh, amazing drinks. And the people who make the difference, right? Uh, that feeling of hospitality is what people look for at the end of the day.

So that's one of those bars in, uh, the area that we live in that makes me kinda, like, go back every time. Very cool.

Dalia: Okay, let's talk about you. You mentioned that you're from Turkey, so how did you... [00:13:00] Give me the CliffsNotes version of how you got from there to here.

Nihat: I think I was always curious to see more, and that started in, uh, probably high school.

I can almost say that I grew up in hotels. Uh, my dad was a hotelier. Uh, my brother, my twin brother, he's a hotelier as well. So it's been kind of like a family business. It's part of our DNA at this point. And I started when I was in high school, and, uh, uh, my dad told me that, like, if you wanna, if you wanna learn, you need to start from the, the bottom.

You need to start from scratch. And I started very, like, from the scratch, uh, at that point in, uh, one of the boutique hotels in, uh, Turkey, which was on the Mediterranean coast. And, uh, after... It, it was almost like a small internship, right? It was, like, two, three months, and I loved it. And, uh, I said, "Okay, I wanna, I probably wanna do this."

And when I was in Turkey, I was always, again, to see... Like, I was curious to see more, so because I think living with a lot of different cultures and, uh, you know, [00:14:00] scenes, it made me curious to see what their culture look like or feel like. So I start traveling. You know, I start traveling, like, personally. I start traveling through business, uh, hotels.

And every time I travel, I- every time I ended up in a, a different country or culture, it amazed me. And I think the bars played a huge role. Food and beverage scene overall played a huge role because I think, uh, the feeling that

you have a new ingredient, something unique, something special you never seen before every time you travel, it's amazing.

Because it makes you more curious. It's like, "Wow, I never heard of this, uh, you know, tea before. I never heard of this pepper before. I never heard of this type of watermelon before." And then you become curious, and you wanna use it. And you wanna find out, uh, the history of it. So I think it connects people, uh, again, with the bar in the center of it.

And since then, I was able to basically move here in [00:15:00] 2022, uh, from Turkey after doing, uh, different, uh, countries and different hotel bars. Wow! Oh my gosh.

Dalia: This makes sense because a drink with ingredients from different parts of the world, and the story behind it that's in the menu- Yeah ... it's almost like a mini vacation in a glass.

And you said you like to- It is ... travel. So now, even when you're in one place- The people are coming to you. You're always interacting with different people who are traveling.

Nihat: Yes.

Dalia: Very cool. All right, also in your book you say that there are some universal rituals of a bar that become an unspoken language.

Well, I don't know if you say that, but the summary of your book said that. Yeah. What are some of those, as you've traveled around the world, those unspoken rituals that are like their own language of the bar?

Nihat: I think, uh, i- it, it really depends, right? Each location is very unique and special, and each system, uh, for bar is, uh, different.

So let's talk about dive bars, right? Uh, you go for just, like, [00:16:00] the fundamental of the, the, the bar, right? You don't expect, uh, a lot when it comes to, like, uh, presentations or, like, the steps of the service. You just wanna be comfortable. And then you have hotel bars, for example, where the layers are a little bit more different, right?

You have a guest staying in the hotel, you have locals in the city, then you may have an event at the same time in the hotel, so the expectations from bars and hotels are a little bit different in that case. Then you have successful standalone

bars that they're just in that specific spot, and they're not part of any other entity, uh, like hotels.

There are some bars that they have rituals, let's say it's 6:00 PM, right? You have the sabrage, uh, champagne, uh, service, uh, that everyone knows, hey, it's gonna be, uh, 6:00 PM. We have to be there as part of the, you know, uh, welcoming. Uh, there are bars that they ring a bell at certain point, uh, because it's part of the culture, because someone did something so great, [00:17:00] it's just part of the celebration.

You get used to it, and you, you go for rituals, you know? Uh, people like to be part of rituals. It makes them feel like, uh, a family.

Dalia: Yeah. I was researching, like, ancient indigenous Florida cultures for an article I'm working on, and it was so interesting to read about their rituals, because a lotta times we think of rituals as something people did in the past.

Mm-hmm. But, like, when it's your birthday, you put candles on the cake, and you blow out the candles. That's a ritual. It is. You make a turkey on Thanksgiving if you live in the US. That's a ritual. And I, I do think we, we need those now more than ever. Do you feel that way? I mean, people make their coffee in the morning, and some of these things you could maybe batch, whether it's your coffee or your lunch.

But there is something comforting about the ritual of doing it every single day.

Nihat: I think so. I think, um, again, I think it goes back to the emotional piece. Uh, rituals makes you feel like part of something, and if you're part [00:18:00] of the ritual, okay, I'm in the, the circle. You know? I'm part of it. So I think guests today trying to avoid the transaction a little bit more to be part of something more meaningful.

I think rituals in this particular situation makes them feel, like, a little bit more emotionally engaged, uh, rather than just a single transaction.

Dalia: Right. That's, oh yeah, transaction. That just doesn't even- Yeah ...

Nihat: it sounds so sterile. Yeah, uh, I mean, it's type of service, right? There's nothing bad or good, it's just the style of the service, right?

Some, some, uh, some moments are very transactional. Uh, some moments you have to, uh, connect more. Some moments you have to go above and beyond. So the expectation is totally different, but it's just different styles of service.

Dalia: Yeah, but that takes a lot out of you, too, 'cause you have to be on. Yes. Okay, last question.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to make it in the hospitality industry? Um- You, you already said that y- it, it can't be just a transaction. It's gotta have some, uh, some service [00:19:00] and some feeling behind it. What's a good first step?

Nihat: I think the hospitality piece, right? Everything else you can learn.

Like, whoever starts in, uh, hospitality, bars, restaurants, they, they start from somewhere at the end of the day. You weren't, you're not born with the knowledge. Knowledge comes after. Either you travel, you read, uh, you go through some sort of, like, situation, it gives you a lesson. The service part is something that, again, it's, it can be trainable, uh, teachable.

The hospitality is basically having that feeling, having that care. So, uh, probably the care piece is very important for someone who's very starting. If you feel like you love it, and it's something that you wanna take care of people, you wanna go above and beyond and just make couple of different cocktails for someone that would feel amazing about the cocktail or the drink or the first sip, and you start talking, I think that's the moment that you feel like, "Okay, well, I, I did a good job for [00:20:00] hospitality," especially working behind the bar.

Dalia: Nice. Well, thank you. I wanna try this hibiscus situation- Hibiscus ... that you, that you brought over.

Nihat: Hibiscus is amazing.

Dalia: Yeah. Well, it was so nice to talk to you. Thank you so much for your time.

Nihat: Thank you very much for having me today.

Dalia: Nihat Çam is director of bars at the swanky Tampa EDITION Hotel in the Channelside District.

Do we still call it the Channelside District? Is it the Water Street Distr- I don't know. It's downtown right by Amalie Arena. Do we still call it Amalie Arena? I don't know. I'm Dalia Colon, I think I need a drink, and I need you to check out the show notes of this episode or our website, thezestpodcast.com, where you will find a link to the Tampa EDITION so you can check out all the wonderful beverage options for yourself.

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