

The Zest S12E10

Vivian: [00:00:00] I just can't find the soy sauce I wanted, the brand, you know, so I have to go to the Chinese market, get my soy sauce, you know. So if you wanna, your food tastes authentic Chinese, you actually have to go to the Chinese market, get the right ingredients.

Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm possess, celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State.

Today she's a social media sensation, and now she's out with a new cookbook.

Vivian Aronson isn't a regular mom. She's a cool mom, as in millions of social media followers. Cool. She's also appeared on Good Morning America, the Drew Barrymore Show, and in People Magazine known online as cooking bomb. The Orlando resident gained fame sharing recipes that she learned growing up in her native China.

In 2021, Vivian released the *Asian Market Cookbook*, and now she's out with a [00:01:00] new book called *Traditional Chinese Wellness Recipes*. Vivian recently chatted with me about Chinese wellness practices that can improve our lives right now today. In this conversation, Vivian also shares how the COVID-19 pandemic led to her online stardom, and she offers tips for aspiring food influencers.

Vivian: I actually, originally from China. I moved here in 2005. So what I do now is as a Chinese mom cooking influencer, I make Chinese foods, uh, at home and I started posting online, uh, especially during pandemic. Uh, so people really like my recipes as the time people stay home, where I watch, I wanna cook more.

Uh, so it's how I, I grew my social media over the time. Even now, I still have to keep up people still. Love to come see my recipes, what I cook for my family, my kids. Yeah. Uh, but I did a lot of different things [00:02:00] before that, you know?

Dalia: Yeah. I wanna hear about some of those things. Yeah. Because you are a superstar now, and I'm sure it's a lot more work than people see online, but tell me a little bit about your journey from your roots in China to now becoming a food influencer here in Orlando.

Vivian: Okay, so I moved here in 2005. I always been cooking my family. I grew up with my grandma and she was a great cook where I'm from, uh, Sichuan in China. People love this. Uh, particular food I cook. It's my pickles. So I start my pickle jar 2005. Actually, when I moved here, I say I wanna have this when eating, growing up with my grandma.

So this is like a, you can keep it up over the years is the original one. So I always say. It is older than you. It's 19 years old, turning 20. I'm gonna make a birthday video. So my family's very into food, my aunt, and she owns restaurants in China. So growing up just in the environment and we eating at home a lot, we didn't really go out, eat the restaurants, so always fresh meals every day.

My [00:03:00] grandma cook and my mom too. Uh, so influenced by by them. I always help them in the kitchen. So when I move here, of course I have to cook.

Dalia: During the pandemic, you started posting your cooking videos. I mean, I think a lot of people did that, but they don't have the success that you have. So why did you start posting those videos, and what is your process like from the idea to the final, you know, video that we see on TikTok or Instagram?

Vivian: So before I even posting a video, I always hosting dinner parties, uh, Chinese New Year, I have friends come over and during pandemic, you know, I can't have people over or friends, they, they, they always want my recipe. I say, okay, maybe I should consider posting my recipe online. So my friends, first I started, my friends can see it.

Um, so they can still make the resident home even we can't get together. So I decided to post 'em online. First, I, I did just photos on Instagram and, uh. Actually those photos track a little attention. I only had like a thousand followers [00:04:00] back then. Uh, the master chef contact me. So 2018, end of, I was posting photos and they contact me.

So I made it to top 30. So it was side story, and after that I thought, oh, okay, so maybe I should make videos. You know, I, I had some experience in making videos before I, I never made a cooking videos, but I made, like when I was moving here, I would travel. I did a. Travel video, I should post on a Chinese platform back two five travel or just everyday life or some funny lip sync videos.

Back then, after having kids, I just stopped posting videos on the Chinese platform, like YouTube, like a Chinese YouTube back then. So I haven't made

videos for so long since my friends on the recipe. I say, okay, I should just pick up my camera again. Doing, uh, cooking videos. Yeah, that's how I started post video.

Uh, that time I think the TikTok just started. I said. I can't just post photos. What's this app? Interesting. I said, people, lip syc. I said, oh, whatever. I'm not lip syncing. Now I'm just posting my video. [00:05:00] Say how that goes. So I just upload my videos on there and I was, uh, surprised. My, I, I remember my first kind of viral video maybe got like a 60,000 views.

It was, I was making a lamb dish, just a spicy citrus style lamb. I said, oh, okay. People actually interesting, learn how to make more traditional Chinese food. Uh, and uh, I always, people ask me, like you said, how I got idea, but actually my idea just every day I cooking the food, that's the food we eat. Yes. I don't have actually come up with idea, so I just, oh, this is dinner.

You know, this is my kids. Right. Yeah. This is what I make.

Dalia: I love that. And you said that you were not eating out a lot. I think a lot of people listening probably do eat out a lot, especially here in America. And so they don't know what to make for dinner. So I wanna know, first of all, when you came from China, what was your first impression of food in America?

I mean, the grocery stores and the restaurants, it can be a big. Change.
[00:06:00]

Vivian: Oh, big change. Um, when I first moved to Minnesota, actually it's a small town later, I moved to bigger city like Minneapolis, but I'm come from a 10 million people city. You know, we walk in the street like I can bump to people. That's just so many people.

When I moved there, the small town, the first thing I wanna try was back to five. I said, oh, I wanna try Chinese food. My husband like, oh, you don't wanna try Chinese food here? But I'm just curious, you know, I just wanna try. He took me to other only Chinese restaurant in town is like lichen. I didn't know what kind of Chinese restaurant.

Now I know it's more like a fast food chain restaurant. I didn't know. I said, okay, I wanna try. So my impression is, oh, there's a lot of food I never had before. I said, oh, I want a one time. I'm excited. I had a bite. I said, what's this white stuff inside? Then I realized, nah, no, it's cream cheese. You know, I never had a cream cheese in my life, first of all, and a Chinese cooking.

There's no dairy. My dad is like afraid of cheese.

Dalia: We should all be afraid of cheese. You never had had cheese. [00:07:00]

Vivian: So I said, that's interesting. But the most interesting thing is after that meal, they give us fortune cookies. So I look at those, I said to my husband, I said, what's this? He just start laughing. I said, I don't know.

What's this? Why they give to this says, said it looks like. Kind of cookie. So he told me the story. Of course I know now it's a fortune cookie that you know you're getting in the Chinese restaurant, but that's just interesting. I've never seen that in my life.

Dalia: Yes. You know, so I think I, I've heard somewhere that Fortune cookies started in like San Francisco, so they're not actually somewhere,

Vivian: right.

California. Yeah.

Dalia: So interesting because when I was in high school, I worked at a quote unquote Chinese restaurant in Ohio. Oh. And most of the staff were Chinese. I'm not, but we would have what they call the family meal, which is the staff meal. And it was nothing like the food that was on the menu.

Vivian: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So the food is, uh, pretty new to me.

Dalia: Yeah. So how do your kids eat these days? Because I guess they're Chinese American, [00:08:00] so what does their daily Yes. Food look like?

Uh, so now they are a little older. I have twin girls. They are turning 13 October, two girls. Then they have a 15 months younger brother. So I, I have like triplets, but Wow.

When they were babies at three, three diapers, why did you do that to yourself? Oh my gosh. So your kids are pretty much eating what you ate and then probably when they go to birthday parties and things, they're getting foods you never would've seen as a kid.

Vivian: Yes, yes, that that food actually, when it goes totally like a pizza or mac and cheese, which mac and cheese I never serve at home.

And pizza, I do make pizza, so I make like a homemade pizza, so they taste different. So the topping, for example, I do little. Chinese inspire like, um, uh, chicken on there. More like a stir fry, like my, my, my version of the orangey chicken, not a, not a deep fried version or a stir fry. So I do on top of the pizza.

So there's a little [00:09:00] different, uh, food. And everyday food I cook will be, for example, like a home. We will have like one meat dish. The meat dish will be. Stir fry, for example. But in China, the meat is like, not like the mean thing. More like, uh, meat is the flavor of the vegetable. If you stir fry, uh, uh, a dish, the meat is basically stir fry.

The ve uh, flavor of the vegetables, there's a lot of vegetable in there, and the meat. Then I like to make a soup and another probably vegetable dish. So we will share like a family thing we share in China is we share the dinner. We always share. To my parents when they first came here. They why you have to, why people order your own food?

Why do they not share? Like, yeah. Wow. Yeah. So that's our culture. Very different.

Dalia: Yeah. That is another difference. Okay. I wanna hear about your new cookbook. What's it called and what inspired it?

Vivian: So the new book is called *Traditional Chinese Wellness Recipes*, [00:10:00] and I, growing up, eating. A lot of food. Food.

Consider medicine like in China. I still remember when I sick my grandma would make me the soup. It's mix of the herbs, they, the, that, that kind of actually Chinese herb medicine is. Tastes bitter, but everyday food, it's, you can still eat as like a regular food of soup or uh, noodles or dumplings. So these are recipes I eating over the year everyday.

Then I wanna bring to my audience or anyone looking for a remedy or a benefit for their life, even you just. When eating, eating healthy, like everyday food eat less, or sometimes people looking for, for example, you have cold, uh, like I, when my kids have a cold, a fever, there's a recipe doing can reduce the fever, sweat, and there are food people like.

Me or people in their thirties, forties looking for boost their, you know, skin or for beauty. So I have the chapter, so for skin and beauty and their chapter one chapter just plant-based. [00:11:00] So, because we eat a lot of, uh, vegetarian food in China. So there's one chapter, just delicate plant-based recipes. Even the buns in the chapters all, uh, plant-based, the filling we, because we love tofu.

Tofu noodles. Yeah. Uh, and another chapter are people who actually looking. Have babies for pregnancy, postpartum. There's chapter for that. And in China I eat so many of those. You don't know how, you don't know how many these recipe I eat after having, having babies that first month. Yes. Really benefit for people who giving birth, so recovering and produce more milk for nursing.

Dalia: Yeah. Wow. So this book is like a, a bible because it has all of the, uh, things that we would wanna look up in it if we're sick, if we're having a baby, if we wanna make our skin look better. Yeah.[00:12:00]

Can you walk me through your daily wellness maintenance routine? Maybe not if you have a cold, but just, you know, you wake up and you wanna do something good for your body, good for your skin. What does that look like for you?

Vivian: So every day, the first thing. I will do is, uh, drink a glass of like warm water in China.

We. We call it balance. We don't drink anything cold, especially in the morning or anytime. And the, the warm water, uh, we kind of warm your stomach, nothing cold. And after that I will drink, uh, coffee later, but not the first thing. No cold water. I sort even. Even just regular, everyday of drinking water. I prefer to [00:13:00] drink, uh, hot water or you call warm water and, and I take kids to school.

Then after that, I will come home, eat my, eat my breakfast, a lot of it, and grow up in China. We'll eat like a K for breakfast or I will pre-make some bun, frozen bun. I can just pop in the fridge, have some K or bounce or, or if I have leftover soup. I made it the day before, I would just reheat it. So something easy in the morning.

And for lunch, I have a lot of, um, like a quick meal. To me, quick meal for lunch would be like noodles, quick noodles. We eat a lot of like a. Between go to school or time, we have some noodles or dumplings just pre-made in the freezer, just popping. So it's a quick lunch for us. It's like that. Then dinner, I

will be spending more time making a whole dinner for, for my family and myself.

So our meals involve a lot of, uh, of course we eat rice every. Rice have to be rice. [00:14:00] Yeah. And there'll be vegetable, meat and protein and soup. So there are dinners. Of course we, we will have dumplings, uh, for dinner that would that just hold dinner if you have dumplings. That's the whole dinner because there are vegetables, meat in there.

Yeah. You guys try not to eat anything. Maybe three hours before bed. But when I was younger I used to whatever, midnight, I still had bomb noodles. Occasionally. Occasionally midnight snack. I'll be noodles. Yes. What's your midnight snack,

Dalia: man? Go in the fridge and get those cold noodles. That sounds so good.

Oh my goodness. Yeah. Okay, so it sounds like you spent half your life in China and now half your life in the us so you've seen the different ways that each country approaches wellness. What do you think are the pros and cons of each? Like what is China doing right that we can learn from here? And what is the US.

Doing Right. If we're doing anything right, that maybe your relatives in China could learn from.

Vivian: So I think during China, I, I, I see the big difference is that a lot of, uh, say ingredients [00:15:00] you cook, uh, you could get it really fresh and like, just in like a farmer market growing up, we didn't even buy food in the supermarket, just like a open market and you can get everything.

So here, uh, yeah, you can actually access a lot of, uh, Chinese, uh, produce now, but still compared to China's a little limited. You know, and I say people prefer still get fresh, cook the meal. In China a lot more. Like my parents still prefer to cook every day a fresh meal. 'cause you, if you cook, actually eating much healthier than you just take out or go to a restaurant.

But now here a lot of young people prefer just, you know, so convenient, right. Uber Eats or just order in. It can, I think you can do that occasionally, but for everyday living healthy, I, I still encourage people cook more at home. It doesn't have to be fancy meal, something simple. Even that, you know, it's better than you just order in from a restaurant or go out.

Yeah. Also much cheaper. Right. So much cheaper

Dalia: for sure. Is there anything that you've adopted [00:16:00] from your time in the US that you feel like was a benefit? I know a lot of people when they move here, like they gain weight, they get less healthy. Are we doing anything right here?

Vivian: Uh, here, I, I think it's just a lot.

I think in China too, but now there are a lot of options than like fast food, right? That's how people drinks. Lot more drinks. I think people drinking. Uh, first drinking, just regular drink. For example, you go, Starbucks got this huge drink. 'cause there's a lot of calories and sugar. They're also easy. You drink something so quickly in two minutes, right?

But you get a lot of, uh, that calories. So growing up, I think, uh, the habits, we, we actually, the difference is I don't really snack, like three meals. Three meals. You just eat your three meals. Uh, my, my grandparents never offered me any snacks between, so I just got the habit. Even though I wanna eat something, maybe some fruit or something, there's just no habit.

So, oh, I'm hungry during my, uh, morning or afternoon, I need a snack. But here, even the school set, you have [00:17:00] to pack a snack for your kids. I said, oh, okay. So I would've packed. Snack. I said, why do they need snack? I think here are the difference here is like people worry about your kids hungry. Right? Just so extra snacks or just so, so much extra food.

People eat. Yeah, if you cut all your snacks, right? Oh, we love snacks here. Drinks

Dalia: we eat just enough food to earn the snack and then there better be snacks at the meeting, at the party. Everywhere we go, we love our snacks. Okay, so where do you find some of those pantry staples or kitchen staples in Orlando?

Vivian: Uh, so there, in Orlando there's a market I go called Enson. It's in the Chinatown of Orlando. It's a good market. You can find a lot of, uh. Uh, dried ingredients. I listen in my book. These are stable, uh, ingredients. Uh, you can get, for example, like a sen or these dried like Chinese herbs, so you can keep it for a long time.

You can just throw it into your soup, chicken soup, any soup you [00:18:00] like, and also fresh produce. Unsen has a lot to fresh ginger, green onions. Also

the herbs there is good too. And sometime they even have, uh, like a fresh dates. And there are more unique fruits. Also, another market called Eye fresh is good. A smaller market, but it's closer to me so I go there too.

There's more Chinese market. Uh, if you are looking for Chinese ingredients, herbs, those two markets are good. The other market, for example, the H Mart gonna open, I'm very excited. Oh yes, A lot. Yeah. But they are more focused on the Korean stuff. For example, I just can't find the soy sauce. I wanted the brand, you know?

So I have to go to the Chinese market, get my soy sauce. You know, so if you wanna, your food tastes authentic Chinese, you actually have to go to the Chinese market, get the right ingredients.

Dalia: Ooh, that's a great point. So sauce.

Vivian: Yeah.

Dalia: Yeah, that's a great point because like here in Tampa we have some Asian stores and we do have a, a lotto market or latte market, but [00:19:00] it's all the different countries mixed together.

And me as an American, I don't even know what's Korean and what. Chinese. So how has living in Orlando influenced your cooking or the ingredients you use? Do you find yourself incorporating some of the traditions of all the different cultures that are here in Florida?

Vivian: Uh, yes, there's a lot of different cultures here and I like here, uh, more options, uh, the fresh stuff, uh, even the herbs or fresh vegetables Here.

It's more than Minnesota. The more choices I think. Uh, here, the weather, we got a lot of, uh, fresh produce. Uh, recently actually I went to a farm, uh, it's like a private farm that I got first time ever in the us. I got fresh bamboo. Ooh. Actually, I cut it from ground. I'm gonna post it. Yeah. There's so bamboo shoots, there are like a baby bamboo shoots.

You cut? I cut it. I cut it myself. Wow. I said, I've done this for a long time. Yeah. So there's not a lot of, uh, like, uh, farms like this here in, in Florida. I can find the, the fresh produce I [00:20:00] need it. And also seafood, you know, in Midwest. I, I miss this. I couldn't even get really good. Fish to find the whole fish.

It's hard, you know, in China, China we eat whole fish in the head and tell everything. Yeah. To find the whole fish is hard. But here it's a lot of fish market or even whole foods. They have whole fish. Yeah. Oh, place Costco. I really sad. Yeah.

Dalia: Costco

Vivian: did not expect you to say you wanna, you, you. Asian people.

Yeah. You wanna make friends with Chinese mom? Go to Costco. There was a lot of Asian moms there. We're looking for a good deal

Dalia: too funny. So a lot of people look to your videos to learn recipes, but some people are watching your videos because they wanna be like you. They wanna be a a cooking influencer. So what advice would you give to someone who wants to explore cooking from their heritage or share their food culture online?

Vivian: Yeah. I think important is you share your story. A lot of people not just want a recipe, they wanna know, oh, [00:21:00] what's the story behind this dish? For example, making pickles, I would tell how, how I learned to make pickles. What's the story? What? Why we make pickles. There are people say, why you make pickles. I say, first of to eat.

Then in our culture, the pickles, we use a lot of pickles for cooking just to flavor in the food. But a long time ago, hundreds of years ago, people were making pickles because there was no refrigerator. You preserved the vegetable. So you can keep your vegetable much longer time. Yeah. That's why we make pickles.

Yeah. So a lot of it. Share the educational facts, but people like to hear some fun facts. My story, so I always suggest someone wanna share your, uh, culture, your food, tell a story behind or who you're cooking for. Maybe you're cooking for my kids or you're cooking for your parents, or, or just cook for yourself or your husband or, or for a wife.

People always like to. No, what's the food for? I know a lot of people cooking food. I don't know. They cook this a huge amount of food. They don't have kids. I don't know who they serve to. You know the [00:22:00] neighbors who they serve the food to the dog? Yeah. I asked someone, I said, you cook so much steak, you can, he's single.

Like single, no girlfriend. He said, I give to my neighbors. I saw lucky neighbors, you know? Yes. Lucky neighbors. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's too funny. And I also do, do think you have to show your face. If you make a social media video, show your face so people not just connect to your food. Also you more important your personality.

So you can see these food account or any, they, they just making the overhead shots, just the hands. So those even you get a lot of views, you don't get a lot of followers, you know, so if you really wanted to connect with audience, show your face. Your face, that's the most important. Yeah.

Dalia: That's great advice.

A lot of people don't wanna show their face because then they have to shave or they have to put on makeup and they have to worry about the lighting. It's, it's extra work,

Vivian: but that's how actually a lot of successful account, mostly they show the show, show the face. You can say bigger influencer, [00:23:00] you, they usually show their face, not the whole, like the video, not the whole time.

At least they show in the beginning or sometime in the end. Or if you don't show a face, you have to use maybe the video with your voiceover with someone's voice. It's better. So people usually connect with the video with if it, if there's a face always better.

Dalia: That's great advice. Okay, last question. What do you love about sharing these traditional Chinese recipes both online, in your videos and now in your cookbook?

You said. You started sharing these videos because it was a way to connect with people who you maybe would've had over for dinner, but you couldn't have a dinner party during the pandemic, and so you started sharing these videos. Obviously the pandemic is over, but your rocket is like on another level now, so why do you keep going?

What brings you joy about sharing this food with everyone?

Vivian: I still think a lot of people still don't know about Chinese food. I still wanna share, there are just so many. Different dishes and culture in China I wanna share. [00:24:00] Um, so I wanna keep going. I wanna more educate young people, get them back in the kitchen.

My kids like get them back in the kitchen, like when I'm cooking. They come help even just, you know, peel the ginger or chop some vegetables or make rice. So that's what I started just in the kitchen, make rice or just, uh, washing the vegetable, you know, just a simple, simple task. I think, uh, the more video I I show, um, on social media, there are more maybe parents or more young people more interested in cooking.

I want people interested in cooking so they can start cooking their own meal at home. Yeah, I think that's important. That's great.

Dalia: Now, do your kids realize that you're a social media star, or do they want to eat that rice now? Because, because mom made it and she's a superstar.

Vivian: Oh, I think at the, yeah, they, they realize 'cause they're friends, they're friends at school.

They watch my video sometime. No. Now kids, they, they even got their iMessages, some friends did a screenshot of them say, Hey, you are in this video like this. Like, they will send [00:25:00] them screenshot or sometime I walk on the street, people recognize me. They're like, oh, okay. Like they realize that the people very friendly would say hi.

Would take pictures. Yeah. Yeah. They, they actually. Now older. Now, when they were younger, they actually. In the video a lot more. Now they're older, they're more like shy. Sometime I say, okay, you help me with this. So then in the video, occasionally helping me cooking, but when they were younger, I was just making video.

They just pop in my background. They just drop like a 3-year-old, you know, they're a few years old. They just dropping without. Let me know. I said, oh, okay. I'll say, oh, that's cute. I just keep it, you know when I add innovation, that's cute. I keep that. Yeah.

Dalia: Yeah. They're more self-conscious now. My kids are too.

Well, it was so much fun to talk to you. Congratulations on the cookbook and on all your success. You're just delight.

Vivian: Thank you.

Dalia: That's Vivian Aronson known online as Cooking Bomb. Her new cookbook is Traditional Chinese Wellness recipes, and she [00:26:00] shared

one of those recipes with us. It's Black Chicken Soup with Ginseng, and we know cold and flu season has entered the chat.

So go ahead and get that recipe on our website, the [zest podcast.com](http://zestpodcast.com). I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a producton of WUSF.. Copyright 2025, part of the NPR network.