

The Zest Bonus with Derrick Fox

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PreRoll: [00:00:00] Support for The Zest comes from Peoples Gas, delivering clean, efficient, and affordable natural gas for cooking at home with precise temperature control. More at floridasenergy.com.

Derrick : I hate going into the MasterChef pantry and having unlimited choices 'cause then it's like, "Well, I could do anything. What should I do?"

But if you give me just four ingredients and say, "Make something," I'll blow your mind.

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. He's a little bit foodie and a little bit rock and roll. This week we're catching up with musician turned MasterChef contestant, Derrick Fox.

Today we've got a fun conversation with Chef Derrick Fox. The Fort Myers native graduated from Estero High School and went on to enjoy a [00:01:00] career as a drummer with the Naples-based rock band Laterdays. After years of touring, Derrick recently put away his drumsticks in favor of an apron. He now works as a private chef, splitting his time between Dallas, Fort Myers, and Los Angeles, where he recently competed on the reality TV cooking competition show MasterChef.

In season six, Derrick was a runner-up, and in season 12, he tied for seventh place. While Derrick didn't bring home the trophy, he parlayed his stint on MasterChef into a podcast called A Bunch of Losers with Derrick Fox. On the pod, Derrick interviews also-rans from reality TV competitions while they all drink from really cute mugs that have a fox emoji on them.

And at the end of each episode, Derrick puts guests through a blind taste test. Because whether he's making music, competing on reality TV, or dreaming up new creations for his dessert brand, Epic Mega Cookie [00:02:00] Company, Derrick is a foodie at heart. I recently chatted with Derrick Fox, AKA Derrick Pelt, about how his music career prepared him to be a chef and what home cooks can learn from the MasterChef kitchen.

Derrick : I go to Fort Myers as often as I can when, you know, I have events or trying to show, you know, some hometown love. But I'm really from everywhere. I mean, a- after high school I joined the band Laterdays, and, uh, we toured and we, you know, we slept in the, in the bus in every city in a Walmart parking lot. But I live in LA.

I have a place here in Dallas. I'm just a product of, like, this whole country. I went to Estero High. Well, that's where I graduated. So I actually, I started high school in Colorado. Freshman year there, the baseball coach loved me, and he had a Colorado Rockies scout sit down with me, and they told my family we had to move to a warmer climate so I [00:03:00] could continue playing baseball year-round.

So I was like, "Let's go back to Florida." I finished the, the rest of that freshman year at Estero, and then graduated from Estero.

Dalia: Wow, okay. So, all over the- So y- you're used to l- you're used to living all over. This is nothing new for you.

Derrick : I, yeah, I don't know how to be in one place for, for too long.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, you know what?

I never asked you to introduce yourself, which is usually what I start with. Mm. And I'm just curious how you would even do that, because you do so many things.

So, so tell me your name and what you do.

Derrick : Yeah, my name's Derrick Fox, and I'm a chef and an entrepreneur.

Dalia: And before that you were a musician. How does that all connect?

Derrick : Yeah, you know, the, I, I haven't played... I literally haven't sat down at a drum set in, like, a year and a half, which is really sad. It hurts. Uh, 'cause I love it and I miss it. Um, but it was one of those things, like- I learned a lot from the music [00:04:00] business as far as just, like, the hustle. You know what I mean?

Like, being able to create something, package it and sell it, and then also putting on a show and making sure the show must go on. Like, all those things come into play with a chef and being a chef. You know, putting the food on the plate is like making music and getting it out on time and making sure that the, you know, the guest loves it.

And then sometimes I do pop-ups where everyone's watching me cook, so that's like being on stage. So I, I took a lot from the music world and brought it into my cooking and my cooking style and, and I think it really shows. But yeah, like, the cookie company that I just started, uh, Epic Mega Cookie Co., I have completely treated it like I would, you know, merchandise for a band.

T-shirts, CDs, all that kind of stuff. So I'm having a ton of fun with that. I feel like I'm back hustling a band, but it's just as sweet, delicious [00:05:00] gourmet cookie.

Dalia: Okay. There are a lot of connections, and if I saw you on the street, I would m- I would think that you had some musical background. You've got the, the lightning bolt dangly earring.

Yeah. The black nail polish, the tattoos. You kinda have that vibe. So you said that, uh, some of that flavor plays into your cooking. Besides the way you approach it, how does that musical background show up on the plate?

Derrick : I think it just, that's just like the artist inside of me. It just, it comes out. I don't like to do anything unless I'm, there's some sort of like artwork involved.

I learned young that like I really liked the artistic side of things and I wanted to be able to make money doing that. And so I think w- for me it just like it, that's the best part is putting it on the plate, 'cause I get, that's where I get to be the artist, you know?

Dalia: Do you have any advice for plating dishes at home?

Something easy we could do?

Derrick : On my Instagram I'm putting up, [00:06:00] you know, cooking videos all the time, and I love to show like plating it too. Um, so watching those you just, you'll learn techniques and I'm probably gonna do another one soon where I'm just doing a plating demonstration. It, negative space, think about the negative space on the plate.

Um, some things like odd numbers. Our eyes like odd numbers on the plate, so like if you're doing, like say you've got a sauce that you wanna dot on the plate or a puree you wanna dot on the plate, do three dots or five dots. If you do four it looks weird. It's just always a thing. You, if you're gonna put shrimp on the plate, put five pieces of shrimp.

I, I don't know what it is. I'm sure there's some scientific thing behind it, like our, but our eyes and our brain, they love o- odd numbers. But have fun. Like that's, I mean that's the end, end of it. Just have fun.

Dalia: Those are great tips, and I've definitely seen food photos on social media where the person was sort of trying to show off something they'd made.

But I'm thinking it may have tasted good, but that looks [00:07:00] disgusting. Ah! Yeah. Just because of the, the color of the plate that it's on or how they, how they sort of presented it. Right. So how did you learn all of this? You have a musical background and a sports background, but then where does the cooking come into play?

Derrick : Yeah, all self-taught. When I was 15 my mom signed me up for drum lessons, 'cause she was like, "Well, I'm gonna make sure that if I'm spending \$500 on this drum kit that you're gonna learn how to play it." So she gave me, she got me drum lessons and I was, you know, very thankful, but I hated the drum lessons.

I was like, "No, I don't wanna do this." I went home, I put on like Foo Fighters or Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and I would just try to play along. And, uh, y- I think Chad Smith, Taylor Hawkins, Travis Barker, just putting on those guys and listening to them play drums, I taught myself how to play drums. And then with food, like, when I was waiting tables at a restaurant in [00:08:00] Santa Monica, I loved like this chef.

He had such a cool vibe, and he just walked around the kitchen like a rock star, and I was like, "I wanna know what this guy... Like, what, what is it about this guy," right? And, and then I would just watch him make food. I would get my tables all taken care of, and I would come and I would stand by the pass, and I would watch him put food on the plate, and I was like, "I can do this.

I wanna do this." And so I'd go home and I would, I would try to recreate his dishes at home, and it worked. I was just like, I don't know, I figured it out.

Dalia: Like, what's something you made at home?

Derrick : Well, I mean, like, he would... Like, he had a Chilean sea bass dish, and which is expensive. It's like \$30 a pound. But he let me buy the, like, raw fish from him so I could get it at a discount, and then I'd take it home, and then I'd just like remake the puree and, and brown butter sauce, whatever.

I mean, it... I make so much stuff it- now it's like it doesn't s- sound like anything. But, um, just going home and recreating his dishes just felt really cool [00:09:00]

Dalia: and inspiring. No, it, it sounds like something. I mean, I'm excited if my kids make grilled cheese. Mm. So if my kid's making Chilean sea bass for dinner, that would be- That would be pretty impressive.

Okay, so your, your latest claim to fame is MasterChef contestant. I love all those cooking competition shows. How did that come about?

Derrick : Uh, season six I auditioned for in 2014 And it's kinda crazy 'cause I was in a pop band. I was playing drums. We opened up for, like, Fifth Harmony and Jason Derulo. Like, we were playing big shows.

And they just, in- internally they weren't getting along. It was starting to go south, and I was waiting tables to, like, you know, make ends meet. And I would feed, I would cook for my friends, you know? And, like, they were like, "You need to go on a cooking show. You need to go on a cooking show." I'm like, "No, like, I'm, I'm trying to be a drummer.

Like, I'm in LA making money as a drummer. Like, that is [00:10:00] hard." And then one day I was like, "All right, let's see what happens." And I, I sent MasterChef an email. I found an email online. I, uh, sent them a, a photo of me playing drums, a photo of a, of a scallop dish that I made, and then just, like,

a, a bio about me.

And I emailed it, I went and I brewed a little cup of coffee, and then 20 minutes later the phone rang.

Dalia: Wow, that's gotta be some kind of record.

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Dalia: Okay, I love watching- ... those shows. They're so much fun, even for people who don't cook. They're just fun to watch. But take us behind the scenes. When you got on set, what was your biggest surprise as a contestant versus when you had been a viewer at home?

Derrick : [00:11:00] Yeah, the biggest surprise, uh, was that we do the least amount of cooking on the cooking show than, like, in our normal lives.

And I'll break it down. So on the show, we're s- we're living in a hotel. So, you know, at a hotel, you, you don't cook anything. When we go to set, we go hair and makeup, whatever. We get our aprons put on. We go in, we find out what the challenge is. You know, five hours have gone by. We haven't cooked anything.

And then they say what the challenge is, and then we read the rules, and we sign off on it. We'll cook, and that is a real hour. So when Gordon's like, "Your time starts now," and we cook for an hour- We've cooked. Right But we're cooking so fast. We're just like-

Dalia: And it's, it's Gordon Ramsay for people who haven't seen the show.

The guy who yells at everyone, British guy.

Derrick : Yeah. Right. So you're, you're scared and you're, like, cooking for your life. So you're, you're not even really, you don't feel like you're even cooking. You're just, you're feeling like you're trying to complete a challenge. And then that's [00:12:00] done, and then we go off stage, we'll break for lunch, we'll come back, they'll taste all of our dishes.

That's like another two hours. And then we'll go back to the holding area, and then w- we'll do interviews, like talking head interviews or confessional interviews, whatever you call them. By the time we're all done with the day, it's like 8:00 at night. We've been there for like 14 hours. We've only cooked for one hour, and then we go back to the hotel and we wake up and do it all over again.

So, like, at home, I cook three, four, five times a day. I'm like, if I get bored I go in the kitchen, I make something So it's, I was really shocked at how little we actually cook. And then, yeah, how long the days were. Like, breaking that day down for you, it's like it's such a long day for one hour of cooking.

Dalia: Wow. So how long is the food sitting there before they actually taste it?

Derrick : Sometimes a long time. They definitely taste it cold. Um, but, I mean, you know as a [00:13:00] chef, you, y- you know, like if a puree is cold or a puree is hot, you know if it's good or not. You can ta- you can taste it. You can taste the consistency, you can taste if it's seasoned well enough.

You've had leftovers where you're like, "Man, this is still good," right? Like y- you have, you bring home a steak from the steakhouse and you haven't eaten it all, and like the next day you slice off a piece with some eggs. Like, it's still good. Y- you, so you know a good steak versus a bad steak. So they're, I mean, it's Gordon Ramsay.

He's been doing it for so long. There's, there's no fooling him. So yeah, it'll sit out for a while.

Dalia: I had no idea. I wonder if that would inform what you would make, like I would need to make something that can sit out for a while.

Derrick : Sometimes you kind of think about it, but they don't care really about that.

They know, they, they take that into consideration. They understand that it is sitting out for a while. So like they tell you like, "We can't do ice cream 'cause that's gonna melt." There's a f- there's like a few oth- You don't really wanna do like a risotto 'cause it's gonna get all clumpy. At the same time, [00:14:00] like where I use that to my advantage is like if I'm putting together a plate, let's say like on my plate I'm gonna have carrots.

Well, I don't need everything to be hot when it goes on the plate. So it's like I'll cook those carrots and get them out of the way, and I'll just let them sit 'cause they're gonna sit anyway. So I get them to where I need them to be, put them off to the side. Anything like that, and then so I can focus on the hero of the dish and make sure that it's perfect.

And then when I go plate it, it's all, like it's all ready. So it's a big puzzle and anyone that wants to go on a competition cooking show, every game, every challenge there's a giant team of producers that have figured out what that challenge is gonna be. And like the minimum amount of time it'll take to do it, they push it to the edge.

They know that it can be done, and then it's for us, it really, it's just a puzzle. You have to figure out the puzzle and put it together. So sometimes it's good to just take a moment and go, "Okay, what order do I need to do this?" And then, [00:15:00] then you'll be successful.

Dalia: That's good advice, 'cause I'm thinking about someone at home cooking Thanksgiving dinner for the first time, or hosting a dinner party.

And it is a puzzle. You have to, you have to time everything out and sort of work backwards, start with what's gonna take the longest.

Derrick : Yep.

Dalia: What, what dish got the biggest wow?

Derrick : This season, I mean really like every one of my dishes was amazing except for one, and it was really hard to deal with 'cause- They don't let you win every round 'cause they need, they need to have a different story every time.

So it's like a, they pick different winners so that different people go up and talk. We had this challenge where we had to take takeout food and elevate it, and we got selected at random, like what our dish was. And they gave me... I ended up with, uh, uh, empanadas, and they said that I had to [00:16:00] elevate that and make it a, you know, five-star dish, whatever.

Oh, and then we also only had 45 minutes to do it, which is insane, and we had to make three plates. And so I'm, I'm like looking at, I'm like looking at the empanada and breaking it down. I'm like, "Wait. Okay. An empanada is meat in a pastry, so that's what I'm working with. And I'm gonna take that and I'm gonna run with it."

And I'm not even, I was like I'm not even gonna be, I'm not even gonna try and stay in the same type of cuisine because then you're comparing. So I was like I'm gonna take, I'm not even gonna make anything that could be compared to an

empanada. I'm just gonna go with the basics of meat inside of a pastry, and I went French with it.

And I did a lobster en croute. So I had to poach this lobster and then chill it and then wrap it. I wrapped it in Swiss chard, and then I wrapped it in a puff pastry and then did an egg wash and baked it, and then I did a, [00:17:00] um, a aji amarillo, uh, hollandaise sauce. So I did kind of hint to the origin of the empanada with a, with a little bit of chili in the hollandaise sauce and then garnished it with some caviar.

Um, but the challenging thing with this dish is that In the 45 minutes, that lobster and croute needed to be in the oven for, like, 18 minutes, and I literally got it in the oven with 18 minutes and 30 seconds left on the, on the clock. So I had to let it cook all the way to the buzzer, and, like, literally pulled it out of the oven and plated it.

And then I left that for the judges to cut open. So th- that was a really hard one because that one needed, that one couldn't, like, overcook, and so I had to kind of factor in for that little bit of time that it's gonna be sitting. Um, and then they called me up, and they cut it open, and it was perfect, and I w- I won that challenge.[00:18:00]

So it was really dramatic, and it was a really difficult dish, but it was... Yeah, it was cool.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, my heart is beating as you're telling the story. Like, this is your sport. For people who aren't into, you know... We recently spoke to the Buccaneers head chef and, you know, if sports aren't your sport, maybe cooking is your sport.

Derrick : Yeah.

Dalia: Are, are there any takeaways? I love, by the way, how you said so casually, "I just garnished it with some caviar." You threw that in. That is the, that is the boujee-est empanada I've ever heard of. I love that for you. But are there, are there any other takeaways from having done the show that we can apply at home?

Derrick : Before going into MasterChef, I mean, I, I was, you know, I was very messy in the kitchen. And you learn real fast that, especially in competition, like, you can't be messy. You have to be very organized. So that, that really helped. And then just the speed of which I can do things now than before. Like, when your adrenaline gets going, like, the [00:19:00] things I can do in 45 minutes, like, it's kind of insane.

And, like, the other day when I was cooking for my client, I, I waited till, like, an hour and a half before dinner needed to be served to go in and start working, 'cause I just needed to challenge myself. I was like, when I go in at, like, 2:00 and I work all day, like, I take my time, uh, sometimes I'll mess up because I give myself too much leash, you know what I mean?

So yeah, what I can do in 45 minutes, it's silly.

Dalia: No, I think that's a great point. We can all kinda challenge ourselves. Or sometimes I'll tell myself, "I'm not going to the grocery store. Whatever I have here, that's gonna be dinner." And I get some of the best dishes that way.

Derrick : Yes. Yes. I always say that. Like, I, I, I hate going into the MasterChef pantry and having unlimited choices, 'cause then it's like, "Well, I could do anything.

What should I do?" But if you give me just four ingredients and say, "Make something," I'll blow your mind, right?

Dalia: Mm. I love that.

Derrick : I love that.

Dalia: So you now work as a private [00:20:00] chef?

Derrick : Yeah. So I'm full-time private chef for a family that, they have, they live in Malibu and they live in Dallas, so I go back and forth with them.

Dalia: What a life you're having.

Derrick : Yeah, it's fun.

Dalia: From Florida to, to California to Texas. Okay, do you listen to music when you cook, and if so, what do you listen to?

Derrick : I used to not because I really like to hear the food. Um, you know, like I can tell if I'm getting, if, you know, like without even seeing the food, I can tell if it's cooking right 'cause I'm listening to it as well.

And so I think for a good like five years I didn't listen to music at all. And then the last like couple years I've actually been putting on podcasts, and then I'll put on, if I really need to, like, amp it up, I'll put on some music that's, like, fast because then it'll speed me up. But I notice that if I put on, like, just whatever I put on, I'll cook at that pace of the music.

So sometimes I'll slow down and I don't even realize it 'cause I got, you know, music in my ears. So I like to listen to Taking Back [00:21:00] Sunday. Uh, I found this new artist, uh, called Sueco. I discovered him off of an Instagram reel, and he's really, really cool. It's like pop punk meets a little bit of rap. Like, it's- it's really cool.

But yeah, just usually I'll just put on a podcast.

Dalia: Tell me about your podcast. So I've seen you drinking out of this mug. Uh, will you- Yep ... hold up the mug? Okay. It says, "For," and then it has a picture of a fox and then it says, "Sake." So For Fox Sake, and it's a play on words. First of all, that's amazing. I want one.

But second of all, just tell me about your podcast. Why is it called A Bunch of Losers?

Derrick : Yeah, so, um, being on a reality competition show, there are, there's only one winner, and there's a lot of losers, a whole bunch of them. So I created a podcast where I sit down and interview anyone that's been on a reality competition show that has not won.

A lot of the times, like, the fan favorite is not the winner, [00:22:00] and there's always so much, there's so much more to learn because the winner gets their time to m- go on and everyone discovers everything about them. They get to do all the press. They do all the interviews. But there are some amazing stories out there and amazing people that just don't get the story because they didn't win.

I've had some amazing people on. I mean, I've had some people from RuPaul's Drag Race, some American Idols, So You Think You Can Dance, many MasterChefs, some MasterChef Juniors. Like, it's- it's going really, really well. Um, it's picking up, uh, insanely fast and I'm just, I'm really proud of it 'cause it's like something that I'm producing that is not really food.

You know? It's not food re- it's food-related when I have chefs on, but, like... And I do a blind taste test with all my guests, so that's really fun. I challenge their palate. I bring them into my world a little bit. But also, it's, like, [00:23:00] good therapy for these contestants to sit down and talk about

their journey and how they got there and what they're doing now, and it inspires people that need to hear somebody else's story that knows that they, that they've gone through something and it's, it's gonna be okay.

You know?

Dalia: I love your approach to that. I think that's such a fun concept, and the next time I'm cooking, I know what I'll be- ... turning on. Well- Yeah, it's

Derrick : fun ...

Dalia: David, for, for Fox sake, it's been so much fun talking to you. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Derrick : You can check out my cookies at epicmegacookie.com.

A Bunch of Losers podcast is on YouTube, Spotify, and, uh, Apple Podcast, and it, it's video on YouTube and Spotify, and I encourage you to watch the video 'cause there's a lot of funny stuff that happens. And then, yeah, if you wanna see food videos of mine and what I'm doing in the kitchen, follow my Instagram, Chef Derrick Fox.

Dalia: Very cool. Well, it was so much fun to talk to you. Thanks so much.

Derrick : Yeah, you as well. [00:24:00]

Dalia: Derrick Fox is a chef, entrepreneur, podcaster, and proud Fort Myers native. For Fox sake, if you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review in your podcast app. It really helps us out. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas.

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