

The Zest S13E11

Jordan: [00:00:00] I think it's just super important for the community to have something like this. It feels pretty rewarding. I think that's one of the, one of the coolest parts about doing it.

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, where coffee meets community.

Call it a coffee shop with great food, or a restaurant with great coffee. For Jordan Hooten. Southern Grounds and Company is above all a community gathering place. The Jacksonville based franchise has locations throughout Florida, including one in downtown St. Petersburg that opened last year. Come for the coffee, then stay for breakfast, catch up on some emails, have lunch, grab drinks with a friend, stay for dinner, and then squeeze in a work.

Out with your run club and if you're us, record a podcast while you're at it. So Jordan is right. SoGro, as the cool kids call it, is Anything but a grab and [00:01:00] go coffee shop. On a bustling Friday morning, the Zest team settled into a table for hot drinks and a chat with Jordan Hooten.

Jordan: I am Jordan Hooten and I'm one of the owners of SoGro St. Pete Coffee Shop here in downtown.

Dalia: Very cool. Okay. There are a lot of coffee shops here in downtown St. Pete. So what's unique about Southern Grounds?

Jordan: I think the variety of offerings that we have. So, you know, we've got full scratch kitchen, um, minimal seed oils, minimal processed food, like it's almost all natural recipes.

So it's, uh, it's, it's good. I think that that's probably the biggest differentiator. And it's also kind of like, the space is like a big thing for us too, so it's not just like. Come in, get coffee. It's ambiance, it's hang out, gather together, which you see up there on the wall. It's like our theme. So it's like, come hang out, stay, bring friends, have meetings, have clubs.

Like it's more of like a community gathering spot than just a coffee shop.
[00:02:00]

Dalia: I mean, the fact that we're doing a podcast interview here in the open air, you. The, the windows open here and, and it's a beautiful day in downtown St. Pete.

Jordan: Well, and the regulars don't even think this is weird because there's like, people will come in here and there's like a run club meeting here, like a women's group meeting here.

It's like all the time. It, it's, it's just kind of like a, what's gonna be going on there today kind of spot, you know, which I love.

Dalia: Okay. You're right. A lot of coffee shops have like muffins and pastries and things, but you can get, you could get like a full breakfast here or a lunch, I guess. So is this, do you think of it as a coffee shop that serves food or a restaurant that has really good coffee?

Jordan: I would say it's. Uh, neither in both at the same time. Um, obviously we have both of those things, but again, I think it's more of like a community gathering place that just has a lot of different things that you can enjoy, you know?

Dalia: Okay. Say more about the culinary side of it, because I think for a lot of coffee shops, the food is an afterthought.

You know, they order, they go to Costco and they get a big thing of [00:03:00] danishes, but you're talking about steak, fruits and all kinds of fancy stuff.

Jordan: Yeah. So it's breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I mean, we're open from six. 30 am to 9:00 PM Um, so you can get anything from like a basic breakfast, you know, just like a sausage, egg and cheese bagel up to steak fruits.

We've, we just put a new dish on there. We have a tuna poke bowl on the dish. Uh, we've got salmon bowls, chicken bowls, and again, all healthy, all made from scratch. Um, we use beef tallow in the kitchen, so we don't use, we don't use any funky oils or anything like. That. So,

Dalia: okay. What are some of the other popular offerings as far as the food?

And then I wanna of course ask you about the coffee,

Jordan: the, not your mama's quesadilla is fire.

Dalia: What's in that?

Jordan: Uh, chicken peppers, cheese, all, all that good stuff. Um, so that's delicious. I usually, it's not an option on the menu, but they'll do it for you. I usually switch it over and do steak, but that's 'cause I'm a steak freak, like I'm obsessed with steak.

A lot of great salads on there. And then just, I mean, all the breakfast stuff is just. Super, super good. Yeah.

Dalia: I love a good [00:04:00] breakfast. Okay. Speaking of breakfast, a lot of times when I'm recording an episode of the podcast for a sound check question, sort of the industry standard question for years was always, what'd you have for breakfast?

And a lot of times people will say nothing or they'll say coffee. Yeah. So why is it important to have a coffee shop that offers like an actual full breakfast?

Jordan: Well, 'cause we're not a coffee shop, remember?

Dalia: Right.

Jordan: Um, it's, it's a, it's a, you can get everything and do everything you want kind of spot. In my opinion.

So it's, it's great because when I'm doing, uh, so my career is actually in real estate. So what's awesome is like when I'm here watching over my shop, I can also sit here and do everything that I want to do. I can eat here three meals a day, every day and not get unhealthy. 'cause I can eat healthy all the time here.

So I can sit on my laptop, eat, eat three meals, check on the shop, work on other stuff. Um. Is a good place to work. It's a good place to eat. It's a good place to drink coffee, and it's a good place to drink a beer or wine when it gets to four o'clock today.

Dalia: Oh, [00:05:00] wow. Well that's amazing. Yeah. Yeah. A lot of people will say, I had coffee for breakfast, and they, the rest of the food is kinda an afterthought, but here it's like you can get it all.

So that's really cool. Okay, we gotta talk about the coffee. I'm drinking a. Chai latte. Alex is also here. She's drinking a turmeric latte. What are some of your favorites on the coffee side?

Jordan: So I'll be honest with you, I'm a pretty basic coffee drinker. Okay. I'm, uh, I'm a vanilla latte guy. That's what I just had vanilla latte here.

Um, I was on a little matcha kick for a little bit. I'm currently over it, but we'll probably come back to it at some point. That's just how I am with things like, it was like matcha this, matcha, matcha, matcha. But

Dalia: I think a lot of people are like that. Yeah. And a lot of people were on a matcha kick. So how do you even figure out, like what, what are the trends?

What will people be into?

Jordan: Well, we kinda have a pretty extensive menu so that you can kind of get whatever you want. So right now I'll do a latte in the morning and then I get. I found, uh, a London Fog. Have you guys ever heard of that?

Dalia: What is that?

Jordan: It's like a English breakfast with milk and vanilla in it.

Dalia: Oh, [00:06:00] I do like that.

Jordan: I like, it was like cloudy out here one day and I had one and I was like, this is amazing. So that's like now my early afternoon drink because if I drink too many of these, I start to feel a little, A little too jittery.

Dalia: Yeah.

Jordan: So now I'll do like coffee in the morning and I'll do the tea in the afternoon, but oh, I was

Dalia: drinking.

Jordan: If you talk to me in three months, it might totally changed.

Dalia: It'll be back to the matcha. Yeah. I was drinking London fogs as a kid, but I didn't know that's what they were called. Any other offerings for the non-coffee drinkers? A lot of people are trying to drink less caffeine.

Jordan: Uh, well we got beer on tap.

We got, uh, we got beer, we got wine, we've got, um, bucha, keefer water. So we have like probiotic waters and, and kombucha, different things like that. Um, so the whole cold case up there just has like, you know, basic drinks, apple juice, couple Coke and Diet Coke and things like that too.

Dalia: Why do you think these.

Sorts of third spaces are so important. Like people talk about, you know, going to the gym, going to religious services as sort of the third space they go to [00:07:00] besides work and home.

Jordan: I think it's just super important for the community to have something like this. And that's, uh, one of the most rewarding things about having it.

Leah is just all the people that come up to me and they're like, we, we just love being able to come up here. I come up here all the time. I come up here to meet my mom. I come up here to meet my friends. I come up here and work on my laptop. It's just, thank you so much for like bringing this to our neighborhood and that just feels pretty, pretty cool for me, you know?

Feels pretty rewarding. I think that's one of the, one of the coolest parts about doing it. Really.

Dalia: Yeah. That's really cool. Have you gotten involved at all in the broader Tampa Bay community? I mean, you're right here on Central Avenue in downtown St. Pete, so there's tons of foot traffic. Do you guys, are you, I don't know, what are some of your extracurricular activities, I guess?

Jordan: Um, I'm a gym guy. I go to the gym and we, uh, we partner with, uh, pine Ellis Run Club too. So they, the run club does stuff outta here. Um, there's a paddleboard club that does stuff out of here. You know, my, my other activities are just kind of rest and work on my other businesses and chill.[00:08:00]

Dalia: What do you see as the future of Southern Grounds?

Jordan: Uh, well we're building another one in South Tampa right now. Um, so that'll be three or four months out.

Dalia: Oh, that'll do great.

Jordan: Yeah, I think so. Okay.

Dalia: I wanna ask you about you, because you said you're into realist. State, but obviously you have some passion for, you know, the, the hospitality business, I guess.

Yeah. So did you grow up drinking coffee? I know that might be a weird question. I used to read the newspaper and drink coffee with my mom

Jordan: doing this was honestly just like the little kid and me getting out, to be honest with you, you know, I'm like full, full real estate career. And [00:09:00] then I'm just like, wow, I love that coffee shop.

It would be cool to have a coffee shop. And it just kind of expanded from there into like real life, to be honest

Dalia: with you. Interesting. So you never had thought about having a coffee shop before?

Jordan: No, I, well, I've always like, well, I kind of did. Yeah. Like, so I've always liked coffee shops and been like, man, it would be pretty cool to own a coffee shop.

And I felt the same way about, uh, a butcher shop. And then we, me and a partner opened a butcher shop as well. So You

Dalia: did?

Jordan: Yeah.

Dalia: Is it still open?

Jordan: Yeah, it's in Atlantic Beach. It's called, uh, Southern Steer.

Dalia: Wow.

Jordan: So I love grilling. I love coffee.

Dalia: That's why you love the steak.

Jordan: So I just, uh, yeah. I love steak and love coffee.

So we, oh my gosh. We had to. I just got obsessive over those things and just got into it. Yeah. What

Dalia: do you like about owning a coffee shop as opposed to your other businesses?

Jordan: Kind of what I was talking about before is probably the best answer to that question. Just the people coming up and telling me like how much the, how happy they are that we open, they, you're walking distance from my condo or what we, we come every day.

We walk the dog there. We're dog friendly and you know, they, [00:10:00] people just can come here and hang out and I think that's the most rewarding part, is just like what it does for other people. Yeah, how much they appreciate it,

Dalia: you know, and have to see that. I'm looking at a dog right now. I should have brought my dog.

She would've been, she would've messed up this whole interview. Okay. Where do you see people's tastes going in the future? Do you think people will want more caffeinated beverages? I know you've talked about some of the other options, but I mean, you're here a lot, and so you get to sort of observe people's changing tastes.

Jordan: I don't see myself stopping drinking caffeine every morning anytime soon. So, but you know, like you said, we've got some other options as well. I've, I haven't, if you've heard this, this is news to me. I don't know that people are stopping drinking caffeine. I haven't heard anything about it,

Dalia: so, okay. I try to limit the caffeine.

I'm, I'm more of a, a tea drinker. Um, usually like herbal teas or I try

Jordan: to limit the beer, but the caffeine, I'm,

Dalia: yeah,

Jordan: I'm good.

Dalia: You can just go back and forth between the two.

Jordan: Yeah.

Dalia: Okay. I know you said you're a gym guy, but what's your favorite item in the dessert case?

Jordan: [00:11:00] The apple pie? Without question.

There's like a little, uh, a little, it's like a bites. It's like a hold in your hand. A little apple pie.

Dalia: Oh, like a hand, like a hand pie?

Jordan: Yeah. A little tiny. Yeah, it's a little tiny apple pie. It's uh, I actually eat it cold and, uh, one of my customers that became a good buddy of mine. Uh, actually introduced me to it.

'cause he told me I get an apple pie every day. And I'm like, okay, there's got, 'cause I don't really eat desserts. Um, I'm not a big sweetss person, but I had one the, now I eat one of those almost every day. So I'll give you one before you leave if

Dalia: you want. Oh my gosh. Please do. But also please don't. 'cause then I'll.

I have to come back here every single day. Okay. Alex, take, take the mic, take over. Alex.

Alex: Hey guys, it's Alex, brand manager of the Zest drinking your, I'm drinking my, uh, my turmeric latte. So my question for you is, how do you guys stay attuned to your customer's sensibilities? Like are there items that you find are more popular than other items, or is it just pretty much the [00:12:00] same all around?

Jordan: Well, we've got a pretty wide variety, so I think there's a little bit of something for everybody. We've got, you know, vegan options, gluten-free options, good sourdough, all like 15 different types of bread.

Alex: Yeah,

Jordan: we've got, um, yeah, some things sell more than others, but, you know, we'll, we'll notice the popularity change here and there, but, um.

Alex: Also for your, like, for your beers and your wines, like your non-caffeinated drinks. Um, do you guys partner with local wineries and breweries? 'cause there's like a bajillion in this region.

Jordan: So Yeah. Our, our, our beer is from Green Bench Brewing right down the street.

Alex: Okay. Okay. Good, good.

Jordan: Our wine, we kind of mix it up.

Alex: Okay. That's fine. That's fine.

Dalia: We love green bench. I remember what I wanted to ask you. A lot of people have a dream. I'm back. Right. A lot of people have a dream of owning a coffee shop. But I bet it's harder than it looks. What's a piece of advice that you would give to your former self when you were just opening Southern grounds, like something you've learned along the way?

Jordan: It, it definitely wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. I think that the [00:13:00] build out is probably the hardest part. Like getting it open is probably the hardest and most stressful part. You get like the fear of failure and you, you deal with all those, like, all the anxiety and emotions of, of doing something like.

This and I tell my former self to get ready, be prepared. It's gonna be a ride.

Dalia: What was one of the, what was one of the hardest parts?

Jordan: Just getting open, dealing, dealing with, uh, dealing with the city, dealing with permitting, dealing with all that stuff. You know, just the stuff that's like literally no fun,

Dalia: you know?

Okay. We were at Cheeky's, which is a seafood restaurant down the street, and he said the same thing. Nate Segal. Yeah. He's like dealing with this. City, the permitting, the garbage collection, just the basic boring stuff. I mean, we just had a garbage truck come by just now.

Jordan: Yeah.

Dalia: That's like sort of the unsexy part of owning a business.

You also said that the fear and, and that makes me think of like imposter syndrome, like, can I do this?

Jordan: Yeah.

Dalia: Was this a mistake..

Jordan: Yeah.

Dalia: But you've now had several businesses. Yeah. So there's somebody listening who has an idea for a business, but they're afraid of exactly the things [00:14:00] you're talking about.

So what do you say to that person?

Jordan: Honestly, I would, I'd want to give you a fluffy answer and say, just go for it. But like really depends on the business. I would say if it feels good, then that's a good start, but then, you know, kind of analyze it and figure out like, okay, like what is the location good?

Is the business sustainable? Do the, what does the finances look like? What, you know, there's, there's a, there's a lot that, that has to come together the right way, but it's worth exploring any opportunity. Like, I've went through multiple business ideas in my head and some of them, you know, it ended up getting decided, ah, it's maybe not a good idea, you know, so don't be afraid, but analyze it before you jump in for sure.

Dalia: So the fear can be helpful. Where did you grow up?

Jordan: Jacksonville. Okay.

Dalia: Okay.

Jordan: Jacksonville, Florida. Yeah.

Dalia: Alex is going to Jacksonville in a couple weeks, so she's like, Ooh, I saw that they have a location in Jacksonville. Yep. Yeah. What do you like about being here in St. Pete as opposed to Tallahassee or Jacksonville?[00:15:00]

Jordan: The food, the walkability, uh, the people. Um. Everybody's kind of trying to meet new people and trying to network and like, I, I like that it's not there. People aren't like stuck in their, in their groups and in their little niches. People are wanting to meet new people and see what other people do. So you just, you meet a lot of different people in different paths.

To life that are doing different interesting things here, I think. Yeah. Uh, more so than you would in another city. That's true. Got like big town, small town vibes. You know what I mean?

Dalia: Yeah.

Jordan: It's what I like

Dalia: about, it's very, and a place like this is the perfect spot to come and meet those people.

Jordan: Yeah. And I've got like friends in here like right now, you know,

Dalia: like, yeah.

Jordan: It's, uh, it's the, the small town, big town. Yeah,

Dalia: you're right. Is

what

Jordan: is what I love about it.

Dalia: You're right. 'cause I said, oh,

Jordan: let's, there's big town amount of things to do, but I see the same people everywhere that I go. Yeah. You know what I mean?

Dalia: Uhhuh. Yeah. Well, before we even started recording, I said, oh, let's take a picture.

You said, oh, my friend's right over there. I'll have him come take our picture. So that's pretty cool. Well, thank you so much. It was so nice to meet you. And thanks for the latte.

Jordan: Absolutely. Yes.

Dalia: Jordan Hooten is the [00:16:00] co-owner of Southern Grounds in downtown St. Petersburg. I know you wanna check out that menu so you can.

Find a link to the SoGro website on our website, the zest podcast.com, or in the show notes of this episode. 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 network.