

# The Zest S11E1

**Kiera:** [00:00:00] Most people don't know anything about Ecuadorian food, let alone culture, let alone people, let alone where it is on a map most of the time.

**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. It's our season 11 premiere and we're kicking things off with a book that's half recipes, half stories, all Latin American.

**Dalia:** Kiera Wright Ruiz has an impressive resume. Food writer with creds in the New York Times and Bon Appetit. Photographer for big name brands including Taco Bell. Recipe developer for the Japan Times, The Kitchen and Food 52. Picture book author. I could go on and on. I could fill up this whole podcast reading her resume, but perhaps most impressive is the vulnerability Kiera displays in her latest work.

**Dalia:** My Half Latinx [00:01:00] Kitchen, part cookbook, Part memoir, the book explores her multicultural roots through a lens of food. Between the mouth watering recipes, photos, and illustrations are beautiful personal essays about her mixed heritage. Her dad is Ecuadorian and her mom is Korean. She gets into her father's drug addiction, her time spent in foster care, and other personal subjects we don't usually find in a recipe book.

**Dalia:** The result is a work that will feed both your body and soul. I recently chatted with Kiera, who grew up in South Florida and now lives in, wait for it, Tokyo.

**Kiera:** I wanted to live abroad, basically, since I was 15. So, it was kind of a matter of where I wanted to move for a long time. And after the first time I came to Japan, I just knew that this was the place.

**Kiera:** It has The best food, and a lot of the things I'm interested in culturally are [00:02:00] here. And it's just, uh, I love a big city, so why not move to the biggest city is sort of my mentality. And, uh, what I do here is

**Kiera:** I write books.

**Dalia:** And that's what I want to talk about. Oh my gosh, my half Latinx kitchen. You sent me an early copy.

**Dalia:** Congratulations. It is the most beautiful cookbook I've ever seen. I mean, the illustrations, the photography, and then of course the writing. Do you consider it a memoir or a cookbook? Or how do you think about it in your mind?

**Kiera:** Well, thank you so much, first of all. Yeah, it's definitely part memoir, part cookbook.

**Kiera:** I like describe it as half recipes, half stories, all Latin American. It's a book reflected on my experience of how I've learned to embrace my Latinx heritage, being that I am half Ecuadorian, but also I grew up in a very untraditional way. So I really just wanted to write this book to let people know that [00:03:00] Untraditional paths exist in the first place, and that's one of the things I hope people get from it.

**Dalia:** Oh, 1000%. And as I was reading it, it was reminding me of like, Trevor Noah's memoir, Born a Crime, or Michelle Zahner's Crying in H Mart, like exploring identity, but in a way that's just so accessible, like it's funny, and it's moving, and then you've got these beautiful recipes in there. Obviously, you have a food writing and photography background, I'm guessing you did the photos for the book.

**Kiera:** Oh, my God. No, I could never. You didn't! There was definitely No! There's a whole team very much involved in it. Lauren Allen was the lead photographer for it. Uh, she also did the prop styling and the food styling. But we also had additional hands helping with, uh, food styling and production assistance as well.

**Kiera:** So that is beyond my skill set, or maybe would have driven me crazy. Okay, because

**Dalia:** I don't know about that. Your photos are absolutely gorgeous. And then you even have some illustrations as well. And it just all comes [00:04:00] together seamlessly. Obviously, you have a food background with writing and photography.

**Dalia:** But even if you didn't, why do you think food was a good vehicle to kind of weave your story together. What makes food a good vehicle for a memoir like this?

**Kiera:** Well, to me, it was sort of like the most obvious answer because I actually like look at my past through food memories. So whether like my

earliest memory I have is eating snow and that must have been when I was around Uh, under two years old.

**Kiera:** So, like, my very first memory has to do with food, uh, taste of some kind. And a lot of, like, the landmarks throughout my life are kind of dictated by, like, what I've eaten. And I'm not totally sure why that is, uh, but it's always just been kind of my North Star, if you will.

**Dalia:** I love that for people who are unfamiliar with your story. Can you give us just the CliffsNotes version? I mean, you've lived [00:05:00] so many different places. You've had such an interesting journey. So can you just run through the different places that you've lived and some of the foods that influenced you in each of those places?

**Kiera:** I was born in New York, lived there for a little bit, but mostly my childhood was in South Florida.

**Kiera:** So in South Florida, just Because of how many people from Latin America are there, especially with like the Cuban influence, I grew up a lot around that kind of culture and food. So, you know, whether it's going to Publix, like the main grocery store and just getting ham croquettes or picking up like a loaf of Cuban bread, that part of the culture is just sort of always in the background, even if you're not paying attention to it.

**Kiera:** And as I moved around, I started to realize. Oh, that's not everywhere. Of course, there's just been so many moves. Technically, like nine months or a year in North Carolina for like a sec. And after college lived in California for a bit back in New York, then Hawaii for one year and now [00:06:00] Japan.

**Dalia:** Amazing. Okay, I really want to hone in on your time in Florida.

**Dalia:** And I have to thank our WSF News Director Mary Shedden, who's been following you since you were a journalism student at the University of Florida, and she's the one who put you on my radar. You talked a little bit about how your time in Florida influenced the way you eat, and in the book you shared that you spent some time in foster care with a Cuban couple.

**Dalia:** Did you, being half Ecuadorian, half Korean, did you identify with the Latin population of South Florida, or did you still feel like, I really still don't quite fit anywhere.

**Kiera:** I think when you're of multiple ethnicities, it's hard to feel like you fit in, in a lot of places, especially, uh, for me being half Asian and half Latinx, I was definitely Depending on like what neighborhood and what house I lived at throughout my childhood.[00:07:00]

**Kiera:** Sometimes I was like the only Asian person at school or one of the few Latinx kids at school and sometimes both representing both sides of it, you know, it, it really kind of depended where I lived for some of my early elementary school. It was like an all, mostly all white school, but then. definitely in middle school, which is something like I talk about in the book is the first time I had really seen like other Latinx kids really own their cultural background.

**Kiera:** And it was like, I never felt like I could fully fit in, especially because of me being mixed. But it was something I had never seen before of anyone even resembling something like myself. And I think like something that's sort of unique about us culture that's definitely definitely does not apply in Japan is this idea of kind of like bucketing people into this larger sense of communities.

**Kiera:** And I think like, you know, whether that's from like, [00:08:00] A census background, like there's a lot of reasons, a marketing background, like a lot of reasons why like Asian people are grouped together when Asia is so large, like Indian culture, even just within India, couldn't even be all comparable, let alone saying India and China, like there, we're talking about huge, huge diverse landscapes.

**Kiera:** And the same thing can be said within Latin America, which is, I feel like, often grouped as one. Giant homogenous thing when it couldn't just be further from the truth and like, you know, me being ecuadorian Ecuador is in fact a very small country and like the people represented Ecuadorians in america is definitely a smaller population compared to like let's say mexicans but even within ecuador, it's so extremely diverse from like a cultural standpoint to a geography standpoint and even though Like, although it's so diverse, there is, just within Ecuador itself, [00:09:00] there is this kind of sense of community that you can build, at least I have found, whether that means meeting other Asian people within the U. S., even if they're not Korean, that we can kind of find some common ground, and I feel like within Florida, like Latin American culture, Of course, hugely diverse, extremely endless in terms of how communities work, but there is a sense of pride that people share. So there is kind of this like common footing that you can find within these broader sense of communities, which is actually one way I've been able to kind of find my way.

**Kiera:** And to embracing like my different heritages.

**Dalia:** Sure, I love that. And I love talking about Ecuador on this podcast because in college I was an exchange student in Cuenca, Ecuador. And so I bring it up probably more than I should. And we went to Guayaquil and Otavalo and Quito and I just have a special place in my heart for Ecuador.

**Dalia:** And I know that in 2017 you traveled to Ecuador. I [00:10:00] love the descriptions of the country in the book. What are some foods from Ecuador that you think deserve more attention than they get.

**Kiera:** Yeah. Well, first of all, I love that you studied abroad there. That's so fun. I think like as a cuisine as a whole, like within the U. S. Most people don't know anything about Ecuadorian food, let alone culture, let alone people, let alone where it is on a map. Most of the time. So I think that we could just start from the beginning of learning anything about how Ecuador is seeing more representation of Ecuadorian cuisine just in the U. S. in general. The things I grew up with the most were definitely shrimp ceviche and seco, which is like a really thick rich stew. I grew up mostly eating like the chicken version of it, but there's lots of different variations.

**Kiera:** Mm. That's such a good one. And you have a Llapingacho recipe in there too, which is something first of all, that's fun to say, and that people don't talk about too much.

**Kiera:** And we've got some recipes to share on our website. We've got [00:11:00] your Elote taquitos, your Mexican hot chocolate cookies. I mean, these pictures are just going to make you hungry.

**Dalia:** You also said in the book, this book exists because of my dad's absence from my life. And I just. So appreciated the generous honesty that you put into this book, you're like really putting it all out there for everybody. So what do you mean when you say this book exists because of my dad's absence from my life?

**Kiera:** To me, I couldn't really write about a story of [00:12:00] culture without laying it all out there. I felt like to really approach how I learned about my multicultural background is to just be as honest with myself during the writing process, but I'm, you know, in turn, like, hope that translated to the page. I think just in general, in food writing, luckily now stories are becoming more diverse, but for a long time, often the stories are rooted in, like, a first generation experience of, You know, I'm fully Chinese.

**Kiera:** Let me tell you about how my mom tried to recreate recipes from her home country using these American products and how they've adapted to my case. And I don't feel like I belong to either culture, although I'm fully ethnically Chinese. And like, a lot of these stories I feel like they're doing such a disservice of what diversity really means.

**Kiera:** And to me, like, diversity, obviously in like the most basic sense, [00:13:00] it goes so beyond what someone's ethnicity is. It means diverse upbringings, it means diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, it means diverse locations. It's not just like, what color is my skin, and that's it. And so I feel like with my book, My life just isn't what people usually assume it is.

**Kiera:** And so, like, when I tell someone, oh, I'm half Ecuadorian and half Korean, they really have this image in their mind of, like, oh, my God, her household must have been so crazy. Like, her mom must have done all this cooking. And, like, oh, yeah, the foods, she must have grown up equally with these cultures. And it's, like, literally nothing about that is true.

**Kiera:** And to me, my dad being Ecuadorian and not growing up with that presence, uh, with him in my life is such a core part of my own story, of course, but also what it means to learn about heritage because so often we learn about culture from our parents. And when that parental [00:14:00] figure isn't there, what does that mean?

**Kiera:** And I think like that's not really discussed specifically in food writing that often. So I wanted to really, you know, shed light on my own story as an example of it, but lay it out there for folks and hopefully, you know, they get something from it.

**Dalia:** Oh, a thousand percent. I got so much from it. I forgot that I was reading a cookbook, you know, I felt that I'm just reading a memoir and it's so beautiful.

**Dalia:** You also shared that your dad battled drug addiction. And when you were 12, you lost regular contact with him and you didn't just lose a father, you lost your connection with your Ecuadorian side. I think a lot of people can relate to that. Maybe they never even knew that parent. So what do you say to the person listening who feels that they've lost a connection to their culture because a parent wasn't in their life or family members passed away. How can they use food to reconnect with that [00:15:00] side of themselves?

**Kiera:** I think food is such a fun, open way to like learn what a culture is. Through food, we can learn so much about history. So I feel like just looking at



food as like sort of gateway into what culture means. can kind of just stop at food sometimes and you can learn so much depending on like what cuisine and dish you're really looking at. Uh, you're like, whoa, a lot of war happened to make this one plate of food. So it really depends on what dish we're talking about. It can just be such an inviting way to learn about culture.

**Kiera:** And like, This is actually not on the half Latinx side, but on my half Korean side. I had this image in my mind for a long time being like, you know, I really want to learn how to make kimchi. Like, look at all these people making kimchi online. And like, you know, even though I'm Korean, like, I don't know how to do that.

**Kiera:** And I felt like, sort of like intimidated that I couldn't like, Take the step to learn it because I felt like I was putting all this pressure on myself [00:16:00] Like what if I mess up and then one time I was just traveling in Seoul by myself and I was like, you know I have a free day I'm a sign up for a kimchi class like why not and it just felt so empowering to be like, oh you can actually just Take into your own hands to learn about something, even if it is such a national cultural treasure to your heritage.

**Kiera:** And even if it's not, just because it's fun, , and that's okay to just start with that.

**Dalia:** That's so great. Do you have any siblings or are you really just. out here on an island. I mean, now you're living in Japan. You're on a literal island, but it sounds like you're kind of on an island by yourself in terms of the experiences that you've had.

**Kiera:** I do have a sibling. So I have a younger brother. And so we definitely shared a lot of our, you know, the same sort of upbringing together. And, um, he's on his own journey, like, you know, learning about his Korean heritage and his Ecuadorian heritage. Learning about one's culture is such an intimate experience.

**Kiera:** So much of it is [00:17:00] about, even if you're sharing it with people, is how you're receiving it. Yeah, so I'm definitely not like, on my own, and I think like, even though I'm on the other side of the world, much of that time since I've been here, I've been working on this cookbook that's about Latin Americans cuisine, which is obviously maybe not being in Japan's at the most Latin American ingredient friendly place It's made me realize like how connected to my culture. I am it doesn't really matter like where I am My knowledge of food and how I connect with these recipes and how I want to

continue to learn more about it It's something that's always transferable Even if maybe you know, you have to substitute ingredients and things like that, but like these sort of memories They're always with me.

**Kiera:** And so like I'm never as far away as I think some people might be

**Dalia:** Sometimes you feel even more connected because you're really having to hold on to who you are. [00:18:00] I want to ask you about the Korean side, your mom's side. You said that it wasn't what people thought where she was in the kitchen making all these dishes.

**Dalia:** So where did she fit into this puzzle?

**Kiera:** Yeah, well, my mom's adopted from Korea, so, like, with that, she didn't grow up in, like, the traditional sense, in her own way, of learning about food, even though she was born in Korea, learning about food and what someone would imagine. She's also, uh, you know, no shade, not a good cook, so, like, she's not the one.

**Kiera:** Um, she's not like, oh, let me bring out all this banchan I like handmade that I spent hours laboring over like that's just not who she is at all. Like, after she was adopted, she grew up in rural Pennsylvania. So like for her comfort food literally means griddled scrapple with like a little bit of molasses, which is like a Pennsylvanian staple.

**Kiera:** And I think it also just speaks to how we think of. Diversity can truly be very diverse, [00:19:00] and it doesn't have to fit within the realms of what someone thinks is traditional.

**Dalia:** Oh, for sure. Yeah, your mom sounds like she's on her own journey. So, yeah, I mean, I just could talk to you all day. But before I let you go, I have to ask you about living in Japan.

**Dalia:** How has that changed or has it changed the way you view your Latinness.

**Kiera:** My Latinness, I think I really has changed my perception of my Americanness. Like me being American has never been more apparent than me living in Japan. So to me, that's always like the most obvious thing because I think, you know, specifically being Asian and Latinx within the U. S. I often didn't feel like welcome sometimes in certain places as I move throughout, you know, the different cities and workplaces and schools I was in, even if I was in



the U. S., sometimes I didn't feel very American. Definitely when I moved here, I was like, Oh, [00:20:00] I am so American in every single way. My belief system, to how I act, the volume in which I speak, how I dress, like every aspect of me has been influenced with my being American.

**Kiera:** So to me, that's definitely like the most apparent

**Dalia:** mmm. Wow. Okay. I feel like Japan is always on the forefront of everything. I mean, even as I'm talking to you, it's Tuesday morning here, but it's Tuesday night, almost Wednesday where you are. So it's like, you can tell me what's going to happen tomorrow.

**Dalia:** And I really think that's true in terms of food, even just on the social media videos. I'm like, Oh my gosh, look at all this cool stuff in Japan. So what's something that we should be anticipating in the food world? You know, eventually it'll get to us probably.

**Kiera:** I would like to say that Japan still uses fax machines. So I just want to directly show that not all aspects of it is as forward as some people think. I had no idea. Just good to know. That being said, this is like a hyper [00:21:00] specific one, but there's like a small island off of Beachtown in Tokyo that like. Specifically, one of the tourist things people go including like local Japanese tourists is they get this like rice cracker, giant rice cracker, that's like almost the size of two to three sheets of printing paper that actually has a whole shrimp pressed into it, it's completely flat in shell and all, and so it almost looks like a fossilized ancient thing but it's an all edible rice cracker.

**Kiera:** I actually just saw the very first one in New York City open up and that's like such a specific thing but I was like Oh, that makes sense. It's finally there.

**Dalia:** Amazing. I have had the best time talking to you. I mean, this book feels like spending time with you. So people listening, I know they are hungry for more.

**Dalia:** And the book is the place to get it because it's, it just really feels like a gift. [00:22:00] So I just want to thank you for writing it. Thank you for being so awesome and so honest. I know probably growing up, you said you felt like the only one, but I know. Many people listening are relating to your story. So thank you for that.

**Dalia:** This has been so delightful. You're so talented. I just can't say enough good things about you. Thank you for staying up late to do this. This is our first

interview in Asia. So what a treat. Wow. I know, we're international, but we will claim you because you're a Florida girl. So we're just so proud of you.

**Kiera:** Thank you. This was great.

**Kiera:** Kiera Wright Ruiz is the author of My Half Latinx Kitchen. She shared her recipe for Mexican Hot Chocolate Cookies. Find it on our website, [thezestpodcast.com](http://thezestpodcast.com). Big thanks, by the way, to WUSF News Director Mary Shedden for suggesting this episode. If you have a suggestion for a Zest Podcast, guest, please shoot us an email.

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