The Zest S11E12
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Anthony: [00:00:00] I love that I can reach outside of our community to draw more people into. You know, spend their money in our community. 'cause like I say, we need it. These small businesses need the customers. Um, they got good food, they got great food.

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. If you are looking for your next great meal, I have two words for you: Call Anthony.

On this podcast, we have interviewed James Beard, award-winning chefs, prestigious cookbook authors. We've talked about the Michelin guide, but at the same time, there's this whole other culinary scene that's equally popular, but we'll probably never be on the radar of, uh, you know, these. Fancy schmancy culinary institutions.

I am talking about the food that is served in convenience stores, gas stations, [00:01:00] and other mom and pop eateries. Maybe you've had one of the best meals of your life in one of these places. I would not be surprised, and maybe you're even among the tens of thousands of people who follow today's guests on social media. Anthony Gilbert, better known online as Call Anthony has garnered a cult-like following with his video reviews of Tampa Bay's under the radar eateries. You know that standing room only barbecue joint. Anthony says it's got the best smoked oxtails in town, the $5 chicken wings in the sketchy looking corner store.

Well, guess what? There's a reason why that place is always packed, and if you're feeling uneasy about going inside Anthony's videos will show you that there's nothing to worry about, only good food to be had. Anthony grew up in the housing projects of East Tampa, and most of his reviews highlight food spots in underprivileged neighborhoods, but his fan base is wide reaching, helping [00:02:00] to bring a variety of customers to small, often black owned businesses. Anthony stopped by The Zest Studios at WUSF Public Media, and we were so lucky to have him. I mean, this is one of the busiest guys you'll ever meet in this conversation. He shares his favorite local eateries.

Why he believes his food reviews are resonating so strongly with the public and get this, his plans to open a restaurant of his own.

Anthony: When I first started growing up, eating was a lot of healthy stuff. That's because, um, my aunt used to take us out to the farms and we would pick our own peas, uh, strawberries, carrots. We would pick it all. So, and then that's how I learned to critique food, I think because. I would always help her cook everything.

So all that stuff was fresh. So it was just a different taste. So that's mostly what I ate growing up. We weren't allowed to eat all that junk food and stuff.

Dalia: Wow.

Anthony: Yeah.

Dalia: So then how did you end up [00:03:00] exploring some of these mom and pop places?

Anthony: Well, you know, once you get a certain age and you be able to be outside, so.

Once I got outside, it was over. I'm talking about I was everywhere. I was in the, um, always in all the hood stuff. 'cause I'm walking around the neighborhood. So I'm going to all these little spots like AJ's corner store, been there forever. Going in there. They got fried chicken. It was a place called Bexley's.

Um, back in the day they used to have this fried chicken sandwich with, um, like chili sauce on it. It was so good. That was my thing. I go to all the hood spots and I'm getting candy, frozen cups. I'm going crazy 'cause I can't get this stuff in the house. That's how, that's how it really,

Dalia: yeah.

Anthony: Really started.

Dalia: That makes sense. That's what kids do. Yeah. So what was the first review that you filmed?

Anthony: It was probably about, about seven months ago now. Um, that's it. That's it. Yeah. No. Yeah, it is, it is been going fast. It's been a, a real wild uproar.

Dalia: You, uproar is correct. You are everywhere. I'm so happy that you even took the time to be [00:04:00] here because you are the hardest working man in showbiz.

Every time I turn on the tv, Google, you're all over the place.

Anthony: I appreciate it. Yeah, I try to, I try to stay at it and, and keep that worth, ethic, it strong so I could. Let people know us about as many small businesses as I can. The first review, I think it was actually the boiled peanuts over on 22nd Street, so I get 'em all the time.

Used to always get 'em, but just this one day I decided to. Post a video about it. And then it was like, I went back in there the next day and they were like, Hey, all these people keep coming in. All these people keep coming in here. They were showing me the video. It was like a hundred thousand views in one day.

I'm like, what? And then I was like, let me just try to do some more of these local spots. And then it just kept going and I just. I just kept it going.

Dalia: Stop.

Anthony: Yeah. So

Dalia: what were you doing before this, or maybe what are you still doing in addition to this?

Anthony: I still do it. Um, now I just, I'm, I'm, I'm really a community person, so I, if it's something resourceful that I can help the community, um, find, I usually do like block [00:05:00] parties.

I do toy giveaways. I give away free food. But mostly that's what I do now, um, is eat.

Oh gosh, what a life. Yeah. So is that where the name call Anthony comes from? Yes.

Call Anthony comes from, um, originally just being resourceful. People would call me for whatever, if they needed to get in contact with rapper Tom G or if they need a pair of new shoes.

They was like, I was the person to call 'cause everybody knew I was in the community. So I just say, Hey man, let me turn this into. You know, a brand type of name. So, and then I just used it for everything

Dalia: That's good.

Anthony: That I was, that I would get involved with. Yeah.

Dalia: When I was putting this on the schedule, I wrote Call Anthony and Outlook added the little phone icon.

Wow. Because they thought, this is when Dalia needs to Call Anthony.

Anthony: Right.

Dalia: They didn't think this is the brand.

Anthony: Right. That's cool.

Dalia: Yeah. That's amazing. Okay, so why do you think these mom and pop businesses are important to [00:06:00] uplift

Anthony: because if you think about it, any mom and pop business, this they bread and butter, like they done put everything they done, earned all their money, all their resources into this business, and then some things might just be not reachable, you know, monetary wise like marketing.

A lot of the things that hold them back. And then not just, just not being able to be exposed, like only the people within the neighborhood know about you. So if, if they can get a little more exposure, a little more people to look at them and see where their business at. Just say if a video gets 20,000 views right.

And they get a hundred customers from that. That's a big influx of customers and that'll, that'll change a person's business

Dalia: for sure. So why do you think people saw that peanut video, for example, and then flocked to this place? What is it about the reviews that's resonating with people?

Anthony: I think it's mostly just that'll be authentic with it.

And I'm just, just really telling how it is to me. Just like, Hey man, this is what I had. This is what it tastes like. [00:07:00] And then I like to show people the food. Like most people that do food reviews, they mostly show themselves. But me, I like to show the food. I like to say, look at the quality of these people food.

Look how this dish looks like. It's mostly the food. If you, if you notice my videos, like I want you to see for yourself. You can almost taste it through the video, you know? So I think that's a part of it as well.

Dalia: How do you decide where to go?

Anthony: A few different ways. Um, people send me a lot of stuff, um, in my inbox, like all the time, so I'll go through those sometimes.

Or if a place that I know has been around for a long time and got some good food, I'm just wondering like what's holding them back. Or I might just be riding by a place and just see it like, Hey, Becky's restaurant. Let me see what that is. You know, go inside, see what it is. And then sometime it's not always about the food review itself.

Sometime it might just be about. Finding out what's holding them back. You know, it might be their staff, it might be the person that's at the register. They're rude, so you only gonna have a customer come one time. They won't be a repeat [00:08:00] customer. It might be the way y'all uniforms look, or nobody's dressed or you know, any little thing.

So I would convey that to them as well. If I go to some of these spots.

Dalia: Interesting. Okay. That's now reminding me of like Gordon Ramsey when he goes into restaurants and, and fixes the restaurant that show, what is it? Kitchen Nightmares or House Kitchen. Right. I used to watch that day. Yeah, that's a little bit of that.

But I did wanna ask you, how do you handle it when you don't like something? Because you said these are mom and pop businesses. A lot of them are black-owned businesses, right. Family owned businesses. We don't wanna like throw anybody under the the bus. Exactly. So how do you walk that line when there are things that you don't like?

Anthony: Well, mostly, um, I would convey that to the owner as well. I would be like, you know, this is what I think every small business has to work on something. You know what I'm saying? No business is gonna ever be perfect. So I don't, I don't never wanna put out a bad review, like, don't eat this, don't go there.

That junk is nasty. Like it's the worst. Now I have a couple of times done some places that's, you [00:09:00] know, just taking advantage of the community. Now, if it's on that level, if it's a place that's just serving bad food, bad food, bad food, taking the dollar, taking the dollar, because you know, you're within the inner city, you're in a food desert, right?

And they're gonna buy it no matter what. They don't care how it tastes, what it look like if they smoking cigarettes on top of it or nothing like that, places like that. Now I'm gonna. Advise the community of, Hey, if you want this hazard or if you down with this, or if you okay with that, then. You can go in there and get that.

Dalia: Wow. That's a lot of power.

Anthony: Yeah.

Dalia: Okay. Take me through the process of start to finish reviewing an establishment. So you've, you've gotten the tips from the community or you've driven by a place you wanna go in. Are you bringing other people with you? How do you decide what to order? Just talk me through it.

Anthony: Uh, it just depends on the, on the moment. If I'm by myself, I just go in by myself. Um, if it's like one of the spur the moments or I'm riding by, I might not never ride by here again, type of thing. I'll just stop. [00:10:00] Um, if it's something where I say, Hey, this might be a great date night, so I will set up a date with me and my fiance and we'll go, you know, we'll have a date there or something like that.

Most people. I don't really recognize me, like if I walk in. So I don't think that hinders the service of the food that I get, you know? So even though it's big on social media, but some places do, like, they go crazy and they'd be like, oh, wanna drop the floor? And like, no, gimme regular service. That right.

You would give, if I just walked in here, you know, I don't want nothing extra. Don't put no extra food on there, none of that. 'cause when somebody see it, they're gonna be like, okay, is that's how much food we getting or what? So yeah, I just, you know, we just go in there and. Sit down and you

know, by the time everybody see how long it take me to eat my food, or they'd be like, oh yeah, he got to be somebody.

Then

Dalia: the camera eats first.

Anthony: Yeah, the camera always eat. The first 15 minutes I get to take a bite and then go back to it once it done cooled down, but it's all good.

Dalia: Are you filming it yourself or are you bringing somebody with you to film it? You have someone here [00:11:00] today filming us kind of behind the scenes.

Anthony: It just depends. Um. As well as the scheduling and, and the type of, um, if, if it was a booking. Now I do get bookings from different restaurants that want me to come for marketing. So some of the restaurants I go to are like, they book me to come. So I will go and, you know, I charge them a marketing and promotion. Fee. Wow. You know, so

Dalia: you have like two different business, I mean, you have many businesses, but it, it sounds like this has branched off into two different things. Yes. Because I'm guessing the ones with the marketing budget are not the hood gas station restaurants.

Anthony: Right, exactly. And some of 'em are, but I would make the, I would make, you know, affordable for them.

'cause people gotta understand for business, big, small or not, you still have to have a marketing budget, a marketing plan. Either way, you can't expect stuff to just fall out the sky. So I always tell businesses that, create your budgeting, you know, your marketing plan and the budget for it. Find out the best way to do it, you know, to get that across.

Like when I do Greedy Lee's barbecue, I know y'all [00:12:00] seen that a million times, but I started out with him just going to do a review and then I helped him with different business plans and ideas. Like, okay, you wanna market? Let's, let's do this. Let's take a thousand dollars and give away some food. Ah, that's the, that marketing goes a lot farther than paying a thousand dollars to a newspaper ad or something, you know?

So it just, you gotta, you gotta have that marketing budget and that plan to help your business succeed.

Dalia: Yeah. Okay. Let's talk more about the food, because I think a lot of people hesitate to go into some of these spaces because some of 'em look sketchy.

Anthony: Right.

Dalia: But some of the best food I've ever had was in some pretty sketchy looking places.

Yeah. So it's great to have you because. People now have a friend exactly. Who can, who can um, make some of these recommendations. So tell me about some of the places that surprised you.

Anthony: Right. So, um, yeah, like you say, people will ride by a place a thousand times just 'cause of how it looked like. Man, I'm not going in there.

Like, you might see [00:13:00] a couple guys hanging outside just all day. You like, man, I'm not going there. But you know, in the back of that store, that convenience store or that hood store. Man, you got somebody back there

in them pots getting down, trying to make a living. You know what I'm saying? At the same time, and the food be good 'cause it's, it's what you're used to.

It's your, your taste buds are used to a certain type of cooking. You know what I'm saying? If you looking for that taste. So the two nine store AJ Corner Store like. Nobody would not go in there and expect the food that come outta there. You're gonna have some people that's smoking some drugs over this side, somebody sleeping on the ground on this side, a couple people running up to you, asking you for something or, but you know, all these people, friendly people just living life.

It's not, you know, it's just the look of it, it is like. People live in different ways everywhere you go. So I just see people and I know I'm from that environment. I know, man, they might just be having a hard time right now. Or you know, people be friendly too. Like you go up there, people be scared to talk to 'em.

But I talk to everybody. I shake they hands, [00:14:00] they sitting on the ground. I go inside, get 'em some food, you know, tell 'em, Hey, life gonna get better today. Gonna get better tomorrow. Gonna get better. So, um, you can learn a lot from going to these places. People, you, you learn stuff you never even thought would go on in life.

Somebody might tell you a crazy story of how they ended up on that ground, you know what I'm saying? So I love it. I love to meet people. I. And I love to uplift people any way I can.

Dalia: Mm. So, okay. What was the name of that store again? And where is it?