

The Zest S12E14

Nate: [00:00:00] So we were trying to make it feel like you, the beach was outside, uh, or your dock, or you had a, your boat pulled up and tied up on the dock. And this is the kind of place where, where you would go after a salty day on the water.

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. Meet your new favorite neighborhood seafood joints.

Call it the best of both worlds. Cheeky's is a seafood restaurant and raw bar that opened earlier this year in St. Petersburg. It has the convenience of the city's walkable Grand Central District with the breezy vibe of a beach front eatery. The restaurateur behind Cheeky's AKA Cheeky's himself is Nate Siegel. He also co-founded the popular Willa's restaurant and adjoining Willa's Provisions Coffee Shop in Tampa. I recently slid into a booth at [00:01:00] Cheeky's to chat with Nate. In this conversation, the Tampa native shares how Cheeky's got its name, how his time working in the Northeast influences his Florida restaurants and why, despite the stress, he still loves working in restaurants.

Nate: So we were trying to make it feel like your boat pulled up and tied up on the dock. And this is the kind of place where, where you would go after a salty day on the water. This is kind of a culmination of a number of my favorite places, um, up and down the East coast from Boca Grande down in old Florida to Palm Beach, and definitely a lot of northeast.

So, uh, I spent summers working out in Montauk at the end of, uh, Long Island in the Hamptons. That was super fun and really, um, you know, very inspirational to what we're, we're doing here with, with Cheeky's some of the, kind of the roadside clam bars and lobster roll spots [00:02:00] that you would just literally on and on nap, peak stretch you would pull over and that that's where you would go.

And it was a big horseshoe bar and all open air, and not even fans just open air. It's my favorite kind of eating. The freshest fish you can get. And we have as healthy a fishery here with, with the Gulf and in Tampa Bay. And we wanted to kind of pull all those things together with, with Cheeky's.

Dalia: Well done.

Tell me what to expect, what's on the menu. And I also wanna know about the name.

Nate: Sure. So you'll come in. We're all about fresh fish here. Always have a fresh catch feature. Uh, this week it's been, uh, tile fish from the Atlantic. Uh, and really all of our fish comes either from the Gulf or the Atlantic. And of course the Atlantic's huge, but we really try to be around the southeast portion of the states.

Um, so Ta Fish would be great. We have an amazing raw bar here feature too. So we always carry at least three raw oysters from the East coast. We love it. Just north of Chesapeake is, is where the water stay cold throughout the year, and [00:03:00] we serve the, we call them good, better, best, the three different levels.

So our House Oyster, the good version is the Blue Points from Long Island. These are actually from the Connecticut side. Uh, then we're also featuring these, they're called Red Raiders. They're from Cape Cod. And then, uh, my favorites are called Katama.

Dalia: That's the best.

Nate: Uh, those are the best. And, um, we've had those on since we've opened and they're everyone's favorites.

Um, they're just like a perfect representation of like the traditional oyster. Uh, for, that's from Martha's Vineyard where I've been, where we used to hang out. And those are the oysters they pull in right from, uh, the pond. They call it a pond. It's not a pond, but right there in Edgartown is where, where they pull those from.

So we serve those half dozen or full dozen with a great cucumber apple mignonette. This really zingy, uh, cocktail sauce with fresh grated horseradish. Saltines, of course, 'cause that's how people in Florida like to eat them. Nowhere else but, but Florida for some reason. But, but we lean into that. Uh, you can get that as a tower.

That comes with, uh, some of our crudo, which is beautiful. It's, uh, tuna, salmon, and [00:04:00] snapper served raw. It's Sicilian style, so full of olive oil, capers, shallots, black pepper, really lovely, super light ice cold. Uh, we

house smoke fish here. Um, we've got one recipe we'll talk about today is our seared shrimp.

So our shrimp is super special. We get right off the coast of Florida on, on the Atlantic side. Uh, they're called Florida Whites and they, they, they're called candy shrimp 'cause they taste, they're as sweet as candy. Um, that's a great kind of, uh, way to start. We of course have a classic Florida, uh, blackened grouper sandwich.

That's our house blackened and spice. It's a little spicy, but really nice. You've got great french fries that go with that. If you're not a fish lover, we've got a, a great classic burger, uh, smash burger. It's done. Oklahoma Sow, where you sear the onions directly into the patty. On the planter so they get all crispy and caramelized and really tasty.

Our lobster roll is a hit, people. My gosh. Love that. My, so it's Connecticut style, so warm, withdrawn butter, big chunks of lobster and a [00:05:00] classic lobster roll butter roll with traditional, you know, uh, cole slaw. French fries. It's, it's killer.

Dalia: Oh, okay. You're making some people hungry. You're making me hungry and I don't even eat seafood.

Nate: Let's do,

Dalia: but, oh man.

Nate: Well, we have a lot of people come in and have oysters for the first time, which is sometimes a little scary. You're like, are you sure you wanna do that here? But they, they love a mar are pretty. Pretty down the middle. West Coast. Oysters are a whole other thing. They've got a lot more complexity to it.

They're a little smaller, they're not as salty. We love those. We just don't feature those yet. We'll probably bring them in sometime soon, but we really wanted to kind of put tie in the whole East Coast

Dalia: Yeah.

Nate: Experience here.

Dalia: Wow. You're off to a great start. So when did Cheeky's Open and what's behind the name?

Nate: So we opened May 5th, Cinco De Mayo. 'cause why not six months late, but on budget, which was great and we love how it came out. So we've been open coming on, you know, um. Four months, which has been, it's been awesome.

Dalia: Yeah.

Nate: This neighborhood, we really want to be just an easygoing neighborhood joint. Um, and that's really what our [00:06:00] neighbors have kind of tied onto or, or latched onto.

Uh, you know, this neighborhood of Korean central districts, uh, and Kenwood is the immediate neighborhood around us. It's so charming, so connected. Uh, everyone, you know, a lot of our neighbors walk here, ride their bikes and it's really that kind of very transient, uh, neighborhood that. That we did, we don't see very much of in Tampa.

So coming over here it's a lot more walkable. Yeah, a lot more

Dalia: that's, you mean by transient, like

Nate: That's

Dalia: right. Like you can get out of your car and walk here and then walk somewhere and get ice cream or something.

Nate: Sure. And that's really one of our favorite things, like Central Avenue, it's like 40 blocks of of walkability and you park one place, you hit a couple great galleries or cocktail bars or little restaurants and everything's independent.

And everything's small and it's just super easygoing and we feel that central is really one of a few boulevards like that in the whole southeast of the country. You know, if you think of maybe Savannah, Charleston, new Orleans, for sure. Otherwise you, you don't really have that. And, and that's what St.

[00:07:00] Pete's done a really good job of over here. Yeah.

Dalia: I always love coming to St. Pete and even the layout of this restaurant, you've got the huge bar. My husband loves to, you know, slide up a stool, you know, talk to the people next to him, watch the game. Mm-hmm. And I like that. It's a, it's a nice. Clean, airy restaurant for sure.

You don't have to go to like a dive bar in order to get that feeling. So I love that.

Nate: Yeah. And it's even a good, great place. We've got a little, you can't see it, but back there, there's a vintage Gallaga and Pac-Man game.

Dalia: Ooh, fun,

Nate: uh, that we got from this great bar in Tampa called, uh, Lowry's Parkade. It's an old school arcade.

And, and they, they brought that over for us, which is awesome. It's great for kids, you know, if you, you bring in the whole family, you know, kids can go play the games for free. Uh, try to break my high score and, uh, and the parents get to have a cocktail.

Dalia: Fun. Perfect. Best of all worlds. All right. This is my third time asking you why is it called Cheeky's?

Nate: Sure. So Cheeky's is a nickname that my big brother Matt gave me as a little one. I had big round cheeks. They're still pretty round, but not as, uh, pinchable I guess. I used to [00:08:00] hate the name. He still calls, calls me it. But, uh, we felt it really kind of drove through the feeling that we were trying to do here, uh, of, you know, we're not taking ourselves too seriously.

It's really fun. We just want come people to come in. Get it as soon as they walk in the door and just have a good time.

Dalia: I love that. Well, thanks. Can I call you Cheeky's?

Nate: Sure.

Dalia: You're like, absolutely not

Nate: sure.

Dalia: All right. So let's talk a little bit about how you got where you are. You mentioned that you were from Tampa and then you moved to New York and then back to Tampa.

So on that journey, who taught you to cook?

Nate: Sure.

Dalia: What was your first job in the restaurant industry?

Nate: Sure. Um, so yeah, grew up in Tampa. Um, lived kind of in every neighborhood around Tampa, especially, uh, in, in West Tampa. And the food in West Tampa. Particularly the Cuban food. It really was a important part for me early on.

Uh, it's so unique to Tampa, um, and it's the easy, amazing places all up and down Columbus Avenue. Columbus Boulevard, I should say, um, are still my favorites. La Terra [00:09:00] Cita are cos snack City with unfortunately is closed. Uh, there's so many that I just, I love so much and, uh, my mom's a great cook. Um, my friends and I love would, would love to cook growing up and so I kind of had a good foundation.

My, my grandfather. Uh, who, who lived in central Pennsylvania, um, had a hoagie shop and kind of like a general market store they call hoagie, they call sandwiches hoagie in, in Pennsylvania. Yeah. And, um, and he had great hoagie and up until he was, you know, he passed away when he was in his nineties, he was still cooking and helping out in kitchens and butchering meat and grinding burgers and things like that.

So that's definitely how it, how it kind of, uh, you know, passed down to me and always been, you know, always been interested in food and, and dining. Um, so moved to New York, upstate for school after college, moved down to New York City. Restaurants were just, it was just a really interesting time for restaurants in the late two thousands, that's when, um, eater came out and, you know, you know, there was much [00:10:00] more media around it.

And certainly New York Times is king with reviews, and I would always go to the newsstand on Wednesdays to get their food section. Restaurants are just stepping into a more of a. More of a kind of lifestyle segment than, than just food and drinks. So I, I was working in, in, in creative and advertising and marketing, which I went to school for.

And, um, lost my job in the recession in 2009 because everyone did. And I made the call. I was like, you know, I, I can always go back and do this, but let me give restaurants a try. So, um, met with a few amazing groups there, um, and ended up working with a guy named Keith McNally. Um, who's New York's probably New York's best rest tour still.

He, he opened and, and really invented downtown. They say he opened a place called Baltazar, which is iconic 40-year-old Brasserie in, in soho. Before that, he opened Odeon, which is still. Super popular, uh, in Tribeca, um, [00:11:00] lucky Strike in soho. A lot of just institutions that are still there and, um, his team is amazing.

They just learned so much from him. The only job I could get never worked in a restaurant was dishwasher. So I, uh, I washed dishes for a while with him at this new place that was called Palino. Uh, a really cool spot right at the corner of Bowery in Houston. Uh, that was unfortunately short-lived, but I learned a ton and uh, and I was just open to anything that the team needed.

Dalia: So your first official job at a restaurant was dishwasher. Mm-hmm. What did that teach you?

Nate: Um, so much how important the dishwasher is to a restaurant for sure. And most important position still teamwork. Everybody's connected from chefs to servers to bartenders. So from Keith, worked there for a number of years, moved up.

I, I was, I became the manager of the dishwashers. I was a steward, which receives all the food. I worked really closely with a chef, uh, a really a, uh, our wine director, this, this amazing guy named Alessio de Sensi. Um, [00:12:00] it was like, Hey, can you help me order wine? And I was like, sure, I'll, I'll do it. And I remember our first meeting, he said something about vintage and I said, what, what do you mean what's vintage?

I didn't even know what vintage meant. That's, that's the year the wine was made. It's really important for, for all of wines. And we had, you know, over a thousand wines on the, on the lists and very much knew that I didn't know much and it was just open to, to learning as much as I could with, with the team around me.

Dalia: Okay. That's great.

So you've had a lot of experience in the Northeast. Mm-hmm. And I [00:13:00] feel like people, correct me if I'm wrong, they, they want something maybe different than a Florida audience would want. So what, from your experience in the Northeast. Translated to Willa's in Tampa. And, and where do the two communities sort of diverge?

Nate: Yeah, well, I think a, a lot translates. Um, so with Willa's, Willa's is an all day cafe. Um, and then we have a coffee shop, right connected in the same building called Willa's Provisions. It's a, a, you know, a traditional coffee shop, the kind of place you wish you lived across the street from. Yep. Uh, and that's open every day, early to late.

Um, great coffee. Uh, house made pastries amazing. Green juice. And the restaurant though is, is something that we, so I have a couple partners there, um, both of which lived in New York and we, we, we really felt that there wasn't much for, for our community here in Tampa where you could go anytime of day and have a great meal and a place that was open all day that really tried to assimilate into the [00:14:00] neighborhood and look around and see what.

What was there, what wasn't there and what was coming. And so we found this, this amazing old building on the corner of Fig and Rome in North Hyde Park. And you know, it's a 1920 warehouse. It was so dilapidated. We did so much work in there to restore it to, to keep the building. It would've been so much easier.

Just to scrape the thing.

Dalia: I'm thinking just keep it for the patina.

Nate: Yeah, exactly. For sure. If you, and when you go to Willa's, if you look down the walls. It almost is a little like case of Vertigo because the walls, there's no straight line in Willa's. So like the walls are bowing, the floors are crooked.

Uh, and we really embraced that. And, um, and we really, we worked with a, um, a designer there, uh, called Fota out of Austin, and they were, were so brilliant and they, they would always say, let's keep. What's old, old and what's new is new and not try to make anything, not to try to combine those, but just let them kind of talk to one another.

So that was very much more of like an architectural, like really interior design [00:15:00] driven. Experience with Willows and we wanted just that easy come as you are kind of spot, whether you want a rotisserie chicken or a burger or a great Caesar salad at any time of day. And that, that's really what we felt was all over the place in New York, but wasn't here in in Tampa.

And you know, we timed it pretty well. You know, we opened, I guess. Opening in, in the pandemic is, is terrible timing, but, um, it, it brought down a lot of New Yorkers, a lot of people from the Northeast that were used to that

and um, really, really got got what we were trying to do really early on and well, it is thriving.

We we're, our, our best years are, are now, actually our best years are ahead as that neighborhood continues to grow around us and, um, and we love what it, it's far surpassed our expectations there.

Dalia: Wow. Sure. Okay, so bringing it back to Cheeky's. What are the challenges and opportunities of being a seafood restaurant in mm-hmm.

St. Petersburg, Florida. Because you just said there are seafood restaurants, you know, right down the street you've got Ted Peters and I'm sure people have a lot of choices. Mm-hmm. So how [00:16:00] does that benefit you and how is it a challenge?

Nate: Well, it's um, just across the street as trophy fish. They've been around a long time.

They're fantastic. There's another oyster bar opening up just a few blocks from us, and then obviously down at the beaches there's full of 'em. And we felt that, you know, if you talk first about oysters, I don't think there are enough of, we didn't think there were enough oyster bars. Um, so that was something that we really wanted to, to dive into.

Dalia: Um, no pun intended.

Nate: Yeah, right. Uh, there's lots of good Cheeky's puns that we can, uh, I'll drop too. And then the fresh fish, um, sure there's a lot of fresh fish, but a lot of it's fried. Sure we fry some of it, but a lot of it we don't. So raw crudos, seared lighter items that I think fish is, fish is usually best prepared with as little touching as possible.

That's why oysters are so beautiful. You don't touch 'em, you just shuck 'em and eat 'em. Uh, crudos, um, is, is. You know, our shrimp cocktail is just a slight, slight poach in the court boon. And the, the [00:17:00] fewer steps for fish the better the fish is. And we're really driven by great products and, and really did a, a lot of work early on to develop relationships with fishermen and shrimpers and oystermen and, and really helped to celebrate what they do every day.

And I felt that there was an opportunity for a place like this that was really kind of checked a lot of the different boxes. With a great bar, um, with ice cold beers

and really fun frozen cocktails and, and a, a cocktail list of classics. But, uh, kind of nostalgic ones that really just are fun. They're not too serious.

You know, we're not mixologists here. We're we're bartenders and it's really about the guests. We're not get, letting ourselves get in the way of the guests having a great drink that's delicious and vibrant and, and really full of flavor and doesn't take a few minutes to make. So kind of putting all those pieces together, that's also family friendly.

A great place to watch the game set right on central. This kind of corner building that we've created, there was a gap that, that we're [00:18:00] trying to fill. Yeah. And that, that's what it is.

Dalia: I can feel that. It feels very approachable. Mm-hmm. Like I'm a guest in your home.

Nate: Sure.

Dalia: You know? Thank I,

Nate: thank you. That's, I love.

That's really, really what we're going for. We actually don't even have host stands in our restaurants. Because you don't have a host stand at your house.

Dalia: Ooh, great point. You

Nate: know, as you walk in, you're not, you just welcome people into your home. Yeah. And say, what can I get you? Mm-hmm. How, what, what are we doing today?

Dalia: Yeah.

Nate: And, um, so that's, that's one big thing that, that we felt was really important to Yeah. To kind of help drive that, drive that home. Mm-hmm.

Dalia: And it feels like anybody would be welcome here. It's nice. It's nicer than my house, but it's not intimidating, so That's right. So in that spirit, do you have a recipe for people who maybe can't get out to Cheeky's just yet?

Is there for sure a recipe that we can post on our website, something they can make at home?

Nate: Yes. Yes. One of our favorites is our garlic butter shrimp. It's usually the shrimp I just mentioned from Ocean Harvest. Uh, and Brad Shirley, he's the, he owns all the shrimper boats and. It, it really just helps us celebrate the shrimp and [00:19:00] it's great.

It's, it's seared in garlic and butter with fresh bread and the sauce that it, it makes with the shrimp shells is just the most delicious sauce you could, you could ever have.

Dalia: Wow. Sounds amazing. Okay, great. And we'll have that recipe on our website, the zest podcast.com. Mm-hmm. Uh, okay, last question. The restaurant industry is tough.

I mean, you said it, you opened a restaurant during COVID, um, and now you've got Cheeky's, which opened in May of 2025. So why are you passionate about this? You said that your background was in advertising and marketing, so you could have gone that route. And I mean, I guess you are sort of. Doing that, that still doing a lot of that.

I mean, you're wearing a Cheeky's hat, Cheeky's shirt, you're talking to me, you're still marketing. But why do you love being in the kitchen, being in the restaurant industry,

Nate: there's so much. Uh, and yes, it's, it's hard, um, especially building a, a new brand, you know, dealing with all the other things that, you know, guests don't even realize with city permits and insurance and.

But with [00:20:00] Cheeky's, with Willa's, you know, we were really able to create something that we feel is, is an important part to a neighborhood. And, you know, we're building a brand from nothing that was just a figment of our imagination. And then we build a team around it and they start to buy in and, and understand what we're doing and then become extensions of us.

And it just creates magic, you know, when you get other people involved in an idea that, that we've been working on for so long. Now we have. You know, over 30 employees here at Cheeky's, almost 50 at Willa's. Um, and that's, that's such a, an important, you know, part of our everyday is just building that team and getting to know them, really spending a few minutes every day with each

team member, seeing what's going on with them, helping them in different ways, whether it's inside the restaurant or out.

And then getting to know guests, meeting guests for the first time, having them come back, right. That retention is so important and building a relationship so that they feel that they belong too. And then we just kind of create this environment that is almost like a [00:21:00] flywheel effect of, of our, our team member becomes ambassadors for us.

They make our guest ambassadors as well, and then it just becomes a second home for people. And that's sweet. You know, when all those things come together, A busy restaurant on a slamming night. And everything's working really well, and teams communicating and guests are having a great time and having celebrations for their birthdays or, you know, it's weddings and really important life achievements that, you know, it's easy for us to take for granted, but it's also guests live their lives with us.

And, and that's, that's really awesome.

Dalia: Oh,

Nate: um, you know, team members at Willa's have been there since the beginning, before opening, you know, so here we are five years later, the team, you know, rely on us to, for their livelihood and, and, and it's, it's a burden, but also such an opportunity to be able to do that every day.

Um, so that's what I love. There's a lot about it and obviously I didn't even talk about the great food, the great drinks that we have. Those are, you know, to create those and bring something a little bit new, but still very nostalgic and and memorable for guests. It's really special and, you know, I've got two kids now, [00:22:00] you know, they get to grow up in it.

They see the value of hard work and, and will soon work here one day. My daughter's eight, my, my son's five and I'm sure they'll be here sometime soon. My wife loves it. She's like, I wanna open one with you. I'm like, are you sure?

Dalia: Oh,

Nate: I don't know. It's really hard. Um, but she'd be great in it too.

Dalia: Wow.

Nate: Um, there's so much to love it.

It's hard to put 1, 1, 1 kind of specific thing on it. Uh, restaurants are so dynamic. There's no industry like it. We change every day. Just try to get a little bit better every day.

Dalia: Hmm. That was beautiful.

Nate: Thank you so much. This has been really fun. Yay.

Dalia: Nate Siegel is the restaurateur behind Willa's, Willa's Provisions and Cheeky's seafood restaurant. He shared a recipe for Cheeky's garlic butter seared shrimp. Find it on our website, thezestpodcast.com. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Enron possesses the production of WUSF, copyright 2025, part of the [00:23:00] NPR network.