

The Zest S13E13

Shelby: [00:00:00] One of my favorite things to hear from people is, I usually don't like that, but, you know, but I liked those colors, but I liked those grits, you know, and, and that's something I definitely strive to, to change people's perception of, of what they think they know of Southern 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. Today, brunch so hard.

It is a meal, so beloved that it counts as two meals. I'm talking of course about brunch and for decades, no list of Tampa Bay's best brunch spots was complete without Oystercatchers opened in 1986. The water front Restaurant sits on the property of Grand Hyatt, Tampa Bay, overlooking the actual Tampa Bay.

Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic Oystercatchers' legendary Sunday brunch, buffet went away and it stayed away. [00:01:00] Until now, on February 1st of this year, the restaurant celebrated the return of its brunch. At the helm was Chef de Cuisine, Shelby Farrell. Farrell grew up on Florida's Gulf Coast, influenced by her family's roots in Biloxi, Mississippi, and Naples, Italy.

Yep. The other Naples. She brings these influences to the Oystercatchers menu, not just for brunch, but throughout every meal all day, every day, and before oyster catchers. Farrell served as Chef de Cuisine at Four Flamingos in Orlando. You may also recognize her from tv. She's been on Movable Feast and Guy's Grocery Games.

Chef Farrell stopped by our studio to discuss what makes a good brunch, regardless of whether it's in a restaurant or at home. She also shares how her love of gardening and photography influence her work in the kitchen, and she reveals the secret to putting together a delicious meal at a moment's notice.[00:02:00]

Shelby: Oystercatchers is a legacy seafood restaurant on the property of the Grand Hyatt, Tampa Bay.

Dalia: What do you mean, legacy restaurant?

Shelby: So, uh, it has been there since 1986. We're about to have our 40th anniversary this year.

Dalia: Oh wow. Okay. I have, I have had the pleasure of, um, enjoying oyster catchers brunch a couple times, which I do wanna talk to you about, but, so it's a restaurant inside of a hotel that's on the causeway, and people in Tampa Bay know where this is.

It's kind of close to the airport. It's got the beautiful waterfront view. But do you think in general. Hotel restaurants have a bad reputation, and if so, why?

Shelby: Uh, yeah, definitely. Um, well, so one of the things about Oystercatchers that I think is unique is that while we're on the property of the hotel, we're not connected to it.

So we are visually and, you know, functionally operating as an independent restaurant. And so that allows us to. Really break away from a lot of the [00:03:00] restrictions of a hotel restaurant, you know, being inside of the building and all of the caveats that come along with that. But I, I think in general, hotel restaurants tend to get a bad rep just because they can be a little bit whitewashed, a little bit streamlined, you know, um, often sacrificing creativity and originality for being accessible to everyone at the hotel.

And, uh, one of the great things about Hyatt and one of the things that has kept me with them for so long is they, they have a, a real focus on creating unique dining experiences. We call them signature restaurants. And, um, so most of the hotels have a signature restaurant, and those spaces really have very little corporate oversight.

They are free range. Uh, I have complete creative control at the restaurant, and so it really allows us to keep it organic, you know, keep it connected to current trends, to the wants and needs of our [00:04:00] clientele, and allows us to operate like an independent restaurant.

Dalia: Gotcha. Okay. Let's talk about the Oystercatchers brunch.

Shelby: Yes.

Dalia: One of my, my mouth is watering, just saying the words Oystercatchers brunch. I remember a few years ago, my husband asked me, where do you wanna go for your birthday? I was like, Oystercatchers, where do you wanna go

for for Girls Day Out? Oystercatchers. Talk to me about the brunch. Paint a picture for me.

Somebody is like you and did not eat breakfast today. And just make them want it.

Shelby: Yeah. Uh uh, the brunch is what Oystercatchers was famous for, for decades. Like I said, 1986, the hotel opened, and from 86 until 2020, the brunch ran, and we have just now brought it back. Uh, actually beginning of February, we're back in full swing every single Sunday.

It really is a grand brunch buffet experience. Something that you used to see a lot more often, [00:05:00] especially at hotels, but it's really died off, especially in the post COVID, you know, restaurant industry. And that includes multiple live action stations that we change every week.

Dalia: Live action.

Shelby: Wait. Yeah, say more.

Yeah, exactly. So that could be a carving station, that could be a pasta station, risotto, you name it. Uh, this past week we did a Lebanese inspired swordfish carving station, and then we did a chilequiles station, so a breakfast nacho with um, fresh carved picanha steak on the station. So those are kind of the highlights.

That's the centerpiece. That's what I love most because we get to change it every single week and keep it really interesting, which is something that's unique to the relaunch of the brunch. On top of that, we have a breakfast station that includes kind of all your classics. We have a massive raw bar, a noshing table with charcuterie, deviled eggs, snacks, a toast bar, a salad bar, and then a [00:06:00] whole pastry station as well.

Dalia: Oh, woo. Okay.

Shelby: Yeah, it's a lot.

Dalia: I'm full hearing about it. Okay. Breakfast, a lot of people say is one of the easiest meals to cook at home, especially if you're doing like scrambled eggs and toast and fruit or something like that. Mm-hmm. So why do you think people still go out for brunch? Obviously I don't have live actions stations in my house, but I could put together a brunch in my house.

Yeah. So why do people still get so excited to go out to brunch?

Shelby: Uh, I, I think it's a combination of. The selection, the options, you know, you have so many things that you wouldn't really be able to throw together so easily at home. Right. And then it's, it's the atmosphere. You know, there's something about.

Getting together with friends, getting outta the family first start of the day. You know, getting to to ring in your Sunday, maybe start off with a little mimosa or Bloody Mary. You know, starting off your Sunday in such a fun, exciting way. And also not having to [00:07:00] do anything yourself. Not having to have those dirty dishes, not having to do that work.

People love a good brunch. Yeah, we do. Yeah. Yeah.

Dalia: And I feel like it's relaxed. It's kind of the best of both worlds because when you go out to dinner, sometimes you feel like you have to get really dressed up. Mm-hmm. Or you know, the waiter is kind of like snooty.

Shelby: Mm-hmm.

Dalia: But when you go out to brunch, it's like, I'm out in public, but I'm still relaxed.

Shelby: Yeah. It's definitely a different atmosphere. It is very, like you said, relaxed is is the best way to describe it. You know, you get to come in. You take your time, you get to kind of nosh around the room, you know, and it's certainly a, a much different experience than going out to dinner.

Dalia: Do you have a tip for making brunch at home?

I had my book club over a couple weeks ago for a brunch, and I felt like I. I don't really know what I'm doing.

Shelby: Treat it a lot like you would any kind of party, you know, have some snacks, have your fruit plate, have some cheeses and meats, you know, have those little [00:08:00] casual finger foods that you can pre-make.

You don't have to, you know, be doing them live. When your friends are there, you have 'em in the fridge ready to go, and then just make something simple to go along with it. An egg dish or something like that, that everybody's gonna like.

Dalia: Okay. What's your favorite brunch cocktail?

Shelby: Ooh, I love a good bloody Mary.

You know, I went well into my, my thirties before I liked a Bloody Mary. I always thought I didn't like them. I grew up in the South where Bloody Marys are such a thing. And I don't know what my qualm was is 'cause I love pickles, I love spice. I love all of that stuff. And, um, and now I've, I've come around.

I understand.

Dalia: Okay. I don't particularly like a bloody Mary.

Shelby: Mm-hmm.

Dalia: So maybe I need to,

Shelby: you gotta try the one on Oystercatchers,

Dalia: I guess. So

Shelby: you do, we make our Bloody Mary mix from scratch and it's phenomenal. We're, we're really into pickles and ferments and, uh, we make all of our spice mixes in house. And so we utilize a lot of that and we make this [00:09:00] really just funky, umami, spicy, delicious, uh, Bloody Mary mixes.

Over the top.

Dalia: Mm. Okay. I'll be the judge.

Shelby: Yeah. You gotta let me know.

Dalia: Absolutely. Well, thank you for indulging my brunch questions. Absolutely. And then I wanna hear about the rest of the menu 'cause to be honest, I've only been to Oystercatchers for brunch. Yeah. And the description says the restaurant's menu blends American southern comfort food with your Italian heritage.

Shelby: Yeah. So I, I grew up on the Florida Gulf Coast. Um, my family's all from Biloxi, Mississippi. Second generation from Naples, Italy, and southern coastal seafood. That's, that's my bread and butter. That's what I love. And so

that it's very much what, uh, oyster catchers specializes in, you know, we, we overlook Tampa Bay, you know, just beyond our line of sight is the Gulf.

We try to make sure that we really focus on that fact. The fact that we have all of this amazing [00:10:00] seafood that's just right at arm's length from us. And so I tie a lot of that back into, to the menu. Uh, more the southern coastal than anything. You know, that New Orleans Gulf coastal, that style cuisine, um, there's, uh, a lot of really, you know.

Unique nuances about that region of, of the culinary world. So we feature things like a Prawn Etoufee, uh, which is one of my personal favorite dishes on the dinner menu right now. So. Very much influenced by that, like New Orleans Biloxi style cuisine. Um, and then things like, you know, uh, we've have Tripletail on the menu.

Tripletail is a personal favorite fish of mine as well. You see it a lot on the Gulf Coast. You see it up in North Florida more. It comes straight outta the Gulf of Mexico, but for some reason, Tampa Central Florida, you just don't see it.

Dalia: Yeah, that's true. Okay. You talked about how your family's from Mississippi mm-hmm.

And Italy.

Shelby: Yeah.

Dalia: What kinds of foods did [00:11:00] you grow up eating?

Shelby: Um, a real mix. I, my, so my. Mom's dad is from Alabama, and so we grew up eating, you know, he was a fisherman and a hunter, and we grew up eating a lot of fried catfish and seafood boils and all of that from his side. And then on my, my Nonna, my mom's mom's side, or we really had all the Italian class.

So she's, again, she's from Naples, so Southern Italy, seafood forward, you know, very, there's a lot of similarities between American Southern and Italian southern cuisine. And so we grew up eating a lot of that, you know, uh. Your, your pastas, your, I mean, you, you name it, all of you, all of the classic dishes.

Um, gnocchi. Some of my earliest memories are, are making gnocchi with my Nonna, you know, being too short to reach the counter, standing on top of a chair and learning how to roll them on the back of a fork. [00:12:00] It's.

Actually one of my, one of my first memories, a lot of things that you don't hear of too, with Italian foods, of ferments and, and pickles.

You know, we do a dish called, uh, melanzane sott'olio. It's one of my all time favorites. I make it at home all the time, and it's just a grilled. Pickled eggplant that you spread over bread and I actually grow a specific kind of eggplant in my garden just to make this dish.

Dalia: Oh, okay. Do you want to ask you about your green thumb?

What you're describing sounds incredible. Do you think that southern food is underrated? I mean, this is interesting because you're. A chef at a hotel restaurant. Mm-hmm. Or a restaurant on a hotel property with a background in southern food. And these are a lot of, you have a lot of like strikes against you.

People have a certain, um, opinion about hotel food. Mm-hmm. They have a certain opinion about southern food. Mm-hmm. They think it's like Duke's Mayo on white bread.

Shelby: Yeah.

Dalia: So is there a particular [00:13:00] southern food that you think is underrated?

Shelby: Ooh, that's a good question. I, I, I think there are a lot of things within southern cuisine that, you know, are underappreciated or, or, uh, seen as like low brow, you know.

Um, collards, collards are a great example. I. Almost always have collards featured on my menu somewhere. Um, we're actually in a lull right now, but we have some new menu items coming out that we'll be featuring Collards, and I'm excited to get them back on the menu.

Dalia: Oh, we're big fans of Collards here. Yes.

Have you ever been to the Tampa Bay Collar Green Festival?

Shelby: I haven't. I didn't even know that was a thing.

Dalia: Dang it. It just passed.

Shelby: Oh my gosh.

Dalia: It's every February President's Day weekend in South St. Pete. We were there. WUSF had a booth and it's the best. We need to, you should be a judge.

Shelby: I, yeah, I can't believe I didn't know about that.

I'm still kind of new to Tampa Bay. I just moved here a year ago and have been headfirst into the revitalization of the restaurant, so I will [00:14:00] note that for the future. I can't believe I didn't know about that.

Dalia: Mark your calendar. We'll connect. You we're good friends with, with the founders. So how do you like to prepare your collards?

Shelby: You know, the classic, classic dude is phenomenal, right? I, I could eat the most days of the week, but personally in my restaurants, um, two different ways that I tend to gravitate towards. I love doing a grilled collared, so I blanch them first to kind of take a little bit of the bitterness away and, and make them tender.

And then we just dress them with a good quality, like lemon infused oil and char grill them. And you get this. Like crunchy, smoky element, you know, less of the slimy part that I think that people are maybe a little bit afraid of with collards. I absolutely love them that way. Uh, and then another way is actually using them in pestos.

Dalia: Yes.

Shelby: So, yes, we're actually, so we have, um, on our upcoming spring menu update, we have a, uh. [00:15:00] Boiled peanut and collard green pesto that's gonna be going live, and I am obsessed with it.

Dalia: Oh, if people could see my face right now, my jaw is like on the floor. That sounds incredible.

I don't know if you have kids.

Shelby: I don't.

Dalia: Okay. I have kids and sometimes parents have to be like sneaky with how we get kids to eat something that they think they don't like.

Shelby: Mm-hmm.

Dalia: Or that they think they already know and. Stand. Mm-hmm. And it seems like that's what you're doing for guests at Oystercatchers.

Oh, you think, you know [00:16:00] Collard Greens? Well, guess what? I'm gonna show you how classy they can be.

Shelby: Yeah, for sure. I, you know, I think another good example of that is grits. Grits tend to get a bad wrap, you know, and it's a texture thing, I think for a lot of people, just like collards. It's, you know, or again, people think it's lowbrow, um, and.

We have rice grits that we feature on our menu. Um, they're using, uh, Congaree and Penn grits. They're grown actually, uh, it is a Jupiter rice grit grown right in Jacksonville. Um, so we get them fresh from the farm and it has so much more bite than, you know, a quick grit, something you'd have at a diner. And we finished them with our housemate pimento cheese and they are phenomenal and definitely.

Change up what people's expectation, and it's one of my favorite things to hear from people is I usually don't like that, but. But I liked those colors, but I liked those grits, you know, and, and that's something I definitely strive to, to change [00:17:00] people's perception of, of what they think they know as southern food.

Dalia: Oh, what a compliment.

Shelby: Yes.

Dalia: Okay, so I love the image of you standing up on the chair. I feel like stools were not a thing when we were kids. And now not in my

Shelby: house.

Dalia: The kids, my kids have a stool. When I, back in my day, we just, we just had the chair in the kitchen. Yeah. So the image of you rolling the gnocchi with your grandmother mm-hmm.

Standing on the chair, that's like such a vivid image for me. And then from there, how did you decide to make cooking your career? And, and how did you learn, you know, how did you sort of fill in those gaps?

Shelby: It's truly. The only thing that I ever wanted to pursue. So on top of, you know, the. Just culture of cooking in my family.

And that also, uh, reaches out to my dad. Um, my other side of the family. Um, they are diehard LSU people and they go to every single game. And if you've ever been to an LSU game, cookouts are a, you go more for the cookout than you do for the game half the time. [00:18:00] And so tailgating and cooking with my family in that atmosphere was a huge part of my, my childhood as well.

Uh, you know, and that's really where I learned to love, like things like tufe, gumbo, crawfish, all of that. I was also fortunate enough to grow up with, um, an uncle who owned a restaurant and he owned a, uh, fine dining, steak and seafood restaurant. Uh, just outside Biloxi, and so I was cutting my teeth with him.

From age 14.

Dalia: Wow. Okay. So you were born for this?

Shelby: Yeah. I mean, I, I'm not joking. It's the, it's all I've ever done. Every job I've ever had has been in restaurants. The only time I've done anything other than be a cook or a chef was being a server at a restaurant. I also cook that.

Dalia: Oh my gosh. You did all the things.

Okay. Well, that might be all you've done professionally, but I know you have a lot of hobbies.

Shelby: Oh, of course.

Dalia: Yeah. Okay. You mentioned having a green thumb. Yes. So what are you growing? How has gardening changed your relationship with cooking?

Shelby: Ooh, good question. So, uh, yeah, I, I [00:19:00] love to garden. Um, when I lived in Orlando, I was really involved in the community garden scene.

Orlando actually has the most community gardens per capita. Any city in the United States. Whoa. Yeah. Crazy fact, right? I used to be really involved with that. And also the arboretum at UCF. And so, uh, gardening is a huge passion of mine. Um, right now, I, I just moved, so my garden's kind of in flux.

Dalia: No judgment, but, and you know what, we just, when did you move here?

We're recording this in March.

Shelby: Um, so I moved here November of 24. Okay. But I just moved again within Tampa about a month and a half ago, so, okay.

Dalia: And you know, we had a freeze. Yes. This winter was rough,

Shelby: brutal. And last winter too.

Dalia: And like everything died. Yes. So even if you had this beautiful garden Yeah.

You would still be starting from

Shelby: scratch. Yeah, for sure. For sure. But what, let's see, what am I growing right now? Right now I'm growing Swiss chard, I'm growing Japanese eggplant, uh, Roma tomatoes. I just planted some loofah, which ooh. Oh. I love [00:20:00] growing loofah because it is edible when they're young. And then, uh, the zucchini almost.

And then if you let them grow all the way, you have a loofah sponge.

Dalia: I didn't know they were edible.

Shelby: Yeah, yeah. When they're about an inch to two inches long, they eat just like zucchini.

Dalia: Okay.

Shelby: Yeah.

Dalia: Fun.

Shelby: Yeah.

Dalia: All right. So, so you get your hands in the dirt mm-hmm. And then you go in the kitchen. Yeah. And that gardener is still with you, so, so how does she come along into the kitchen with you?

Shelby: Yeah, for sure. I've always been really invested in. Kind of, I guess the farm to table aspect, you know, and we're not a farm to table restaurant. I, I don't claim that because that would mean that we would really need to have a. Huge percentage of our product coming from local farms. For me to feel comfortable claiming that title, you know, is

Dalia: is there an actual definition of a farm to table?

Because everything started at a farm at one

Shelby: point. Yeah. Yeah. I think it's one of those kind of overused kind of hot button phrases, but there is, to me, a [00:21:00] true farm to table restaurant is getting. At least the vast majority of their product from local farms. Um, and, you know, not sourcing from Cisco or Fresh Point or any of these big, massive distributors, you know, getting away from the big distributors and, and going straight to the source.

I think that's the big part of Farm to Table is. Getting it straight from the person that grew it, whether that's 10 minutes down the road or across the, across the country. If you're sourcing it direct, being somebody who loves to, to garden and who loves to grow their own food as much as possible. I, I definitely have an appreciation for Farm Fresh product and I, I try to build those relationships, um, with my local farming community as much as I can.

Dalia: For sure. Okay. I have to, before I let you go, ask you about cooking on tv.

Shelby: Oh, yeah.

Dalia: And, and being a, uh, well, I don't even know if this is actually a cooking show, but I, I gotta ask you about this. So you were on Movable Feast?
[00:22:00]

Shelby: I was.

Dalia: And Guy's Grocery Games? Yes. With Guy Fieri. Okay. So obviously those shows are for entertainment value, but is there anything we can take away from them and use in our home cooking?

Shelby: Uh, yeah, I mean both of them are, are definitely, there's an entertainment aspect to both, but they are at their heart cooking shows. Right. And so, you know, Guy's Grocery Games, I think is, is a great example because

you are literally running around a grocery store. You know, everything that's cooked in that show is products that you can find at the store yourself, and, you know, and, and seeing how people can take.

Limited product, limited options, you know, um, and spin that into an incredible dish. You know, I, I, I think that is something that people can learn from in their home cooking too, because you don't always have to have every little ingredient. You don't, a lot of times, if you think about it critically, you can get creative and, and spin with what you have on hand.[00:23:00]

Dalia: Are there any ingredients that you always keep on hand that makes that easier?

Shelby: Uh ooh. Just having a wide variety of spices. My spice cabinet is insane and I have probably every little spice from every country that you can think of, and it's a collection that has taken many, many years to build. But having just all of that on hand makes it so easy because I can then take.

Whatever protein and vegetables I have and spin it, but I have the spices that make it taste as you know, as the original dish was intended.

Dalia: What's the spice you have that I probably don't have?

Shelby: Ooh. Oh, I mentioned it earlier. Zatar. Yep. Zar.

Dalia: Yeah. I don't think I have zatar.

Shelby: Yeah, I don't, I don't think a lot of people do.

So it's a blend of, uh, of a specific kind of Middle Eastern oregano, sumac, and sesame seeds. So you get a lot of savory notes, and then you also get this bright citrusy lemon zest kind of flavor from the sumac. [00:24:00] And, uh, yeah, it's delicious. Roasted vegetables, chicken, eggs. It's so versatile.

Dalia: Oh, I'm so hungry.

Okay. We have to, we have to end this 'cause you never eat breakfast. Yeah, it's my time and I'm ready for lunch. Okay. But before I let you go, you started the conversation by mentioning that you work holidays. Yes. 'cause a lot of people go out to eat, but for some people holiday meals mean. At home. Yes. And it means waking up at like 4:00 AM and putting the Turkey in the oven and basically falling asleep at dinner because you're so exhausted.

So, so talk to that person who has never had a holiday meal in a restaurant. You know, Easter's coming up. Mm-hmm. Uh, mother's Day, things like that. Why is it okay to eat holiday dinner in a restaurant?

Shelby: I think you kind of named it, you, when you cook at home, you put so much of your time and energy into that meal, and there's a lot to be said about that.

You know, the family classics, we all have so many memories that are tied [00:25:00] into our family holiday meals. Right? But. I, I always think about my mom, you know, growing up on holidays, you barely would see her, right? She's in the kitchen the whole time. She's not getting to enjoy herself. She's not getting to kind of enjoy those casual moments throughout the day because she is, you know, headfirst creating that food for everyone else to enjoy.

So, coming to a restaurant, it, it allows everybody to get to spend that time together, right? Everybody's on an even playing field. Everyone's there, everyone's present, and it. Gives room for, I think, like I said, everybody to really enjoy themselves and enjoy their time.

Dalia: That's beautiful. Well, I enjoyed my time with you.

Shelby: Yes.

Dalia: That's Chef Shelby Farrell of Oystercatchers. I know this conversation made you hungry. It definitely made me hungry. So Alexandria Ebron and I had to hightail it over to Oystercatchers just to make sure the brunch was as good as we remembered. [00:26:00] And it turns out it's not. It's actually way better if you can believe that.

So look in the show notes of this episode or head to our website, the zest podcast.com to find a link to Oystercatchers so you can make a reservation for the special occasion in your life. And you can see video from the Oystercatchers brunch on our social media. Just follow us on Facebook or Instagram at the Zest Podcast.

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