

The Zest S9E10

Rodney: [00:00:00] The whole point of them being the devil is that they were spicy and originally they were much spicier than they are today.

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, speak of the devil. New York has pizza, Chicago has hot dogs, and Tampa has devil crab. Like so many aspects of life in the 813, our city's iconic street food has ties to, you guessed it, the cigar industry. Whether you grew up eating devil crab or you have no idea what I'm even talking about, you will develop a new appreciation for the delicacy.

After today's conversation, our guest is historian and friend of the pod, Rodney Kite Powell of the Tampa Bay History Center. Yes, he'll teach you all about the history of devil crab and even how it's made. And then Rodney shares his own passion for Devil [00:01:00] Crab, an affinity that really only a born and bred tampon could feel and he'll reveal his favorite local spots to find it.

Rodney: My name is Rodney Kite Powell. Uh, I am the director of the Touchstone Map Library at the Tampa Bay History Center, and I'm also their chief historian.

Dalia: We always love having you on. Food history is my favorite part of doing this podcast. We've talked about the Cuban sandwich. We've talked about cafe con leche.

We've talked about guava. Mm-hmm. And now you're here to talk about devil crab. What is devil crab?

Rodney: So, devil crab is something that is very unique to Tampa. So you think about Maryland crab cakes or the, another version of a devil crab, uh, which is very common in the kind of Mid-Atlantic, but the devil crab for, for Tampa is this, you know, beautiful kind of roll that has crab meat.

The sofrito, which is a mix of tomato and [00:02:00] onion and green pepper and garlic, and it's the, the blue crab is cooked in that, and then it's first wrapped in, um, kinda white bread, and then it is covered with breadcrumbs from kind of

traditionally day old or two day old Cuban bread and then deep fried and it's amazing.

And so the kind of original version of Devil Crab is, is basically a. The crab shell is filled with kind of a crab mixture. Um, but this, of course you can't eat the, the crab shell. Um, but this is a great kind of what we would say, kind of grab and go meal. And it is solely a Tampa invention because it was basically invented during one of the major cigar strikes here in Tampa in the 1920s.

Dalia: Ooh, okay. For people who don't know about Tampa's history with cigars. Can you just briefly tell us about that and why the cigar strike would've led to the invention of devil crab?

Rodney: So Tampa beginning in the 1880s really took off as a a, what we kinda consider a modern city, [00:03:00] and there were three reasons for that growth.

The railroad was. Probably the biggest because it was the most versatile. And then the, the phosphate industry is the one that's forgotten a lot. But it was very important 'cause of our port. But the thing that we really kind of hang our hat on culturally is the cigar industry. And that started actually in, uh, in 1886 in what is now Ibor City.

And it, uh, was almost entirely a Cuban or Spanish workforce, although by the late 1880s, early 1890s, we had a lot of Sicilians coming into the area. But by the turn of the 20th century, it was the dominant industry in Tampa and, and really probably one of the most dominant industries in Florida. And by the 1920s, there were almost 500 million cigars produced in Tampa every single year.

All by hand. So there were dozens of really large cigar factories and literally hundreds of, of smaller factories and thousands and thousands of workers in the workforce. Now they were very skilled workers. It was like, uh, [00:04:00] factory work, really like none other. Um, it was very kind of craftsmen like work.

The other thing is a lot of the, the workers were avowed socialists and communists, and some even anarchists. And that did not work really well with the capitalist cigar factory owners. So there was oftentimes friction between a labor and ownership. So there were several strikes throughout the years over different things, whether it was the craft itself, you know, basically telling these cigar workers that they didn't have the skill to know how much weight or how much tobacco to put into individual cigars or the length.

The width or whatever. And so over time there were lots of different, uh, labor strikes. And one of these was in the early 1920s. Well, some of these strikes would go on for, for weeks or even a, you know, a month or more. And no one's getting paid during that time. So people are looking for other things to do to earn money, and also trying to figure out what they can eat.

Our bays have been full of blue crabs. Um, even today they are, but certainly back then, and so you could crab very easily. So [00:05:00] eating crabs was something that was very common. There's another dish called crab, uh, chilla, um, which is a whole other thing to talk about, but the abundance of crabs and then the ingenuity of, of people kind of came together for this little handheld meal.

And the benefit of it was after the strike was over, there were some who still wanted to make these things to sell 'em to the workers, and they were an easy thing to eat on the go. And so there actually was this guy named Miranda who became one of the most popular devil crab salesman. And he kind of, uh, modified this, this motorized scooter that he had to have a heated container in the front that he would fill with devil crabs that he and his wife would make.

And he would drive around Ybor city and even as far as south as the port, uh, just south of uh, first Avenue, what is now Atmo. And he would sell these crabs until when he sold them out, he'd go back home and his wife would fill the thing back up. 'cause she'd been cooking all that time and they had a really good business.

They put. Their kids through college, you know, with that. But again, it, it all goes back to this kind of desperate time where they were looking to use the [00:06:00] resources they had available. Crabs, which were abundant. Cuban bread, which was abundant and white bread. That's that kind of middle filling, which was also abundant and cheap, and it led to a really delicious meal.

Dalia: Wow. I love how one thing leads to the invention of a food. So a cigar worker strike. And is that the origin of the Cuban sandwich as well?

Rodney: No, the Cuban sandwich has a whole nother story going to it. Okay. Um, really going literally back to Cuba as this mixed meat sandwich, uh, that has been refined in Tampa.

To be something that we really consider at the kind of quote unquote Cuban sandwich. And we're very much sticklers about it. It has to have salami because that's the Italian side. It's almost like we know we, we created this, this myth of

this mass meeting in Ibor City of, of Spaniards and Cubans and Italians and Germans, and they all brought their own ingredients and let's make a sandwich.

Um, that's not what happened.

Dalia: Wow. You're busting mints. Okay. I guess I was thinking more of the fact that it's handheld, so maybe Well,

Rodney: that's true. Yes.

Dalia: Maybe it's like an on

Rodney: the go. The, yeah, the food, the popularity of it and the, and [00:07:00] really I think the ultimate kind of settling on ingredients and style and the pressed and no mayo, things like that because it was a food on the go.

'cause it was something that you would buy and not necessarily eat at that time. Um, kinda the idea of shelf stable, all of these things can last without having to be reheated or refrigerated.

Dalia: Okay. Well thanks for taking that little detour with me.

Rodney: Yeah, sure.

Dalia: You grew up in Tampa? Mm-hmm. What was your experience with Devil Crab?

Rodney: Oh, I love devil crabs. And [00:08:00] so in high school, uh, their Carmines, which is still in, in Ybor. At, uh, what they called the Carmine combo, which was a devil crab and half a Cuban sandwich. And it was probably like \$7 or something like that, or \$6.

And so it means friends would go into Ybor and go to Carmines and then from there on, you know, I just always loved them. And so it's now kind of become a quest to find, you know, find the best one, find where they're inexpensive because like everything else, they've gotten kind of expensive. 'cause crab meat's expensive.

You wanna make sure they don't use imitation crab meat, so you gotta pay the premium for that. And there are a lot of places around town. That do a pretty good devil crab's. Getting the, the dough to crab ratio is the hard part. And

Dalia: yeah, it seems bready

Rodney: they, well the smaller ones are bread or because you gotta kind of have something to hold together.

And then the bigger ones, I think almost are overwhelming. Um, there's some of them you almost the size of a softball and that's much too big. So I would say like the perfect size devil crab is probably on the order of a [00:09:00] mid-size to slightly smaller. Baking potato. Um, that's a, that's a pretty good size 'cause that you'll get a good ratio of, of assuming that they're gonna actually gonna go to the expense of, of the crab meat, filling it with a lot of good crab.

And then, but you still, the, the breading is important 'cause that's where you get some pretty good flavor. With those day Cuban breadcrumbs. Um, but then you have sides to have hot sauce. And so that's the other side of it. The whole point of them being the devil is that they were spicy and originally they were much spicier than they are today.

Um, and really they've kind of been Americanized in the sense of, of having a less spicy option. So now we have to add hot sauce to it.

Dalia: Okay. I was gonna ask why it's called Devil crab. Yeah. By the way, what high school did you attend? You said you would go after

Rodney: I went to plant school. To plant plant? Yeah.

Dalia: Okay. You're very local. Yeah. Love it. Have you ever made devil crab.

Rodney: Uh, no. My mother-in-law has, but we've not tackled that. We've made flan, which was a real challenge and it was good.

I love a flaw,

but we madelon. That was hard.

Dalia: Flan seems tricky.

Rodney: It is. You, it's easy to scorch the, the caramel sauce bit.

Dalia: Yeah.

Rodney: And then we didn't even know [00:10:00] if it was set. It was, it was very, it was very trying. It was good though. Mm.

Dalia: I mean, how could it not be? All right. So where are some of your favorite places to get Devil Crab?

Rodney: Oh, you're gonna make me name names.

Dalia: Name names.

Rodney: So the Floridian on Kennedy is really good. Of course, the Columbia, I gotta say the Columbia.

And then they are good. It's a good devil Crab. They do three smaller ones rather than one kind of larger one. Um, Flon Factory is really good. Um. They also do a smaller, I think they do two smaller ones.

Dalia: Shout out to Flon Factory.

Rodney: I think they're really good. I

Dalia: feel they're underrated and yes, the Flon is great, but they also have good savory

Rodney: food.

It's a, it's a good Cuban there. Yeah. And the Lassa Las Sag Goa's a good one. Uh, I guess I, rather than saying ones, I'm not a big fan of all

Dalia: Yeah.

Rodney: Keepers to the positive.

Dalia: Tell me those, uh, off mic.

Rodney: Yeah. But, um, and it's, none of 'em are bad. It's just, you know, again, that that ratio of, of the, the, the filling to, to dough is, is a hard one.

Dalia: So why do you think it's still around it? It's been around for now over a hundred years. Mm-hmm. And it was [00:11:00] started for a particular reason. Mm-hmm. We have a lot of options today. Yeah. When you describe even from

your high school days, the sort of crab combo crab, a Cuban combo. Yeah. To me, I'm thinking my 13-year-old likes to go to McDonald's and get the whatever meal.

Rodney: Mm-hmm.

Dalia: So there are so many options today. Why do you think Devil Crab is still going strong?

Rodney: Other than the fact that tastes really, really good. Um, I think, again, I think a lot of it's culture. Um, there are still so many Cuban restaurants in Tampa that it's something that's expected. Uh, oh. West Tampa Shop, that's another good one.

But I think, I think it really, it's, it's, it's that, it's the fact that those food ways are still such a part of our culture that. If you open up a place that sells Cuban sandwiches, how can you not possibly sell double crabs?

Dalia: Mm. What do you mean by food ways?

Rodney: Well, I think just the, the, the, the concept of food as culture, you know, it's, it's a, a both an entry 0.2 culture.

It's a way to [00:12:00] preserve one's culture if you move to a different place. It's the concept of how we. Kind of learn about and consume food.

Dalia: Yeah. Like not just what we eat. You could be a my 13-year-old daughter and go get devil crab and you enjoy it, but you're now part of this larger story. Exactly what we eat, how we eat it, why it was invented, why is it here, how it's prepared.

Mm-hmm. That's so cool. So can you find Devil Crab outside of Tampa?

Rodney: I was in Key West two years ago. And I got of course a Cuban some pretty good KO leche.

Dalia: What about

Rodney: Ke lime pie? Well, you know what? I like key lime pie, but I just wasn't having dessert, I guess. I don't know.

Dalia: Okay, fine.

Rodney: But, uh, key lime pie is good.

Um, Calamondin pie is really good too. Ooh, calamondin is a, is another citrus fruit. It's, it's a, it's a, it's tart like key limes. They're tiny, tiny, tiny, uh, you need about 30 or 40 of 'em to make a pie, but they're really good.

Dalia: Wow.

Rodney: That's a different story too.

Dalia: Noted.

Rodney: Okay. Uh, yeah, my wife makes a really good calamondin pie, but, uh, but you know, [00:13:00] I've, I've not, I gotta say.

I think if I'd have seen a devil crab somewhere. I mean, what do y'all think? I don't, I don't, I don't, you

Dalia: know, I don't know. And Alexandria Ebron is here too. So maybe Alex, you wanna weigh in on this, but, but you know what, I think if you were outside of Tampa and you saw Devil Crab, you'd be like, it's not gonna be as good as you would.

I get, get know what the

Rodney: heck it is. Yeah,

Dalia: yeah. So you,

Rodney: because it's not an empanada, it's not, again, it's not a crab cake at all. I, I, yeah, it might be a, a hard, uh, hard mountain to climb for somebody.

Dalia: Yeah,

Rodney: I think it's great.

Dalia: It's our thing,

Rodney: you know, again, we, you, you mentioned the Cuban sandwich and, and you know, it's, it's a really fun topic to, to talk about the Cuban, um, because it is such a part of, of our identity and it is fun to Razz Miami about their Cuban 'cause it's not as good, but it's not ours.

It's, it's, it's not theirs either. Uh, it's not Key West as Cuba's and it, and we've refined it. Ours is ours. Theirs is theirs, but the devil crab is ours. And I think you're right. It's, it's kind of neat to almost, [00:14:00] to know that you can't get it anywhere else. It's kinda like our bread, Cuban bread, because you can't,

Dalia: the

Rodney: Cuban bread, I, you know, new Yorkers love talking about their pizza, but no one beats Cuban bread.

Yeah, particularly from Lassa. Oh, oh my gosh. I, I will, I will shout somebody out there. Oh

Dalia: yeah.

Rodney: Lassa, there's second to none.

Dalia: No lies detected. So good. Do you say deviled crab with an ed or devil crab?

Rodney: It? That's another great question. It, it's, I think, officially deviled crab, but you'll find it deviled crab.

Like a deviled egg. But it's devil,

Alex: yeah.

Rodney: Is the, is the devil official way. Because it's spicy

Alex: and I didn't even know Devil Crab was a thing until like less than five years ago.

Dalia: We mentioned it on the podcast briefly a few years ago in an episode about foods to eat for gas barilla, because if you're having Yeah, that's a good one.

A gas barilla party. Yeah. Mm-hmm. You have to have devil crab.

Alex: Mm-hmm.

Dalia: Yeah.

Rodney: Oh, absolutely.

Dalia: Thank you so much. My pleasure. Thank you so much. Always great to have you on. [00:15:00] That's historian Rodney Kite Powell of the Tampa Bay History Center. Where are your favorite spots in Tampa Bay? To find Devil Crab, hit us up on Facebook or Instagram at the Zest Podcast and let us know.

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.