

WATN Chef Marques Clark of YES CHEF Village

Dalia: [00:00:00] Exciting news. The Zest has been nominated for "Best Podcast" in the Creative Loafing Best of the Bay 2026 competition, and we need your vote. Just go to botbtampabay.com, as in Best of the Bay, tampabay.com. Click on entertainment, then click on best podcast, and cast your vote for The Zest. Again, that's botbtampabay.com.

If it's easier, just click on the link in the show notes of this episode. And speaking of the Best of the Bay, we have been having such a great time catching up with some of our favorite local past Zest guests, and you can hear more about it in this conversation that I had on Florida Matters: Live & Local.

Thanks in advance.

Matthew: Well, this summer, Dalia Colon, host of The Zest, WUSF's podcast about food and culture, is checking in with some of the past guests of The Zest to see what they're up to now. Marques Clark grew up in South St. Petersburg, in a neighborhood considered to be a [00:01:00] food desert. He studied culinary arts and went on to found the nonprofit YES CHEF Village.

Chef Marcus first spoke with Dalia Colon in 2024, and she caught up with him recently to see how things are going. Dalia, welcome back to Florida Matters: Live & Local.

Dalia: Thank you so much.

Matthew: Well, let's get back to your first interview with Chef Marques, where he talked about what got him started on his culinary career.

Chef Marques: I learned how to cook through watching my mom. And she told us, you know, she was like, "Listen, I'm not gonna be cooking for all eight of you every night."

Dalia: I know that's right.

Chef Marques: So, so my mom had to, we had to learn real quick, and something about it stuck with me more than it did my other siblings

Matthew: So Chef Marcus had to learn to cook with limited resources, right?

How did that sort of translate into the career he's crafted for himself now?

Dalia: Sure. He grew up in South St. Pete in what many would consider a food desert, an area that doesn't have access to grocery stores, a lot of poverty. Some people would call it even food apartheid because it's, uh, possibly intentional.[00:02:00]

Mm-hmm. He wants to make sure the next generation has it better than he did, so he founded YES CHEF Village. It's short for Youth Enrichment Services Children's Healthier Eating Foundation, and it educates kids and their families about better food options, and he even hosts community meals.

Matthew: Okay. Now, in that or- original interview, as you mentioned, I mean, you talked about the kinds of grocery stores, uh, available to people living in wealthy neighborhoods, stores with healthy food options.

Chef Marques: Now, who can afford those foods? People who live in those neighborhoods where those stores are prevalent. Now, when you look in a Black neighborhood and you just walk outside and look down the street, what do you see there? What we call food deserts.

Matthew: So it sounds like, Dalia, the kind of, uh, definition's expanded a bit beyond a food desert these days, right?

You talk about some of the other, uh, kind of labels that are given to these places beyond food desert.

Dalia: Sure. So we've probably heard the term food desert, not a lot of access to healthy food. How about a [00:03:00] food swamp? You've probably driven through a neighborhood that had no grocery store, but a lot of, like, corner stores, a lot of fast food places.

It's, it's technically food, but it's not very nutritious. Mm-hmm. And then as we discuss in our new interview you'll hear in a moment, food apartheid is really the term that people are latching onto these days.

Matthew: Right. So there's, is some real kind of intentionality to, to the way these places are designed, and it sounds like the, the solutions are within our grasp too if, if people wanna make them happen.

Dalia: Yeah. So I actually got to catch up with Chef Marcus at Soul De Cuba Cafe in Seminole Heights recently. We collaborated with Hyde Park United Methodist Church to host a lunch and learn conversation about food deserts, and we arrived a little early so he could fill me in on how he's preparing to possibly do something about these food deserts.

Matthew: All right. And so here's what, here's why he says getting healthy food into school lunch programs is so important.

Chef Marques: How can a child's brain fully develop when everything is filled with sugar, everything is filled with high-fructose corn [00:04:00] syrup? How can a child's body fully develop w- if they're not eating the proper nutrition?

Matthew: So he's got this goal of eradicating childhood hunger, obesity, diabetes, and, and getting better quality food into school cafeterias, right? That's, those are some big goals. How's he going about that?

Dalia: Absolutely. Yeah. Big, big ideas for a big goal. So in October, he is staging a 700-mile bike ride to w- to raise awareness for childhood obesity, you know, better food in schools, childhood diabetes, things like that, "From the Keys to the Capitol."

Matthew: Oh, wow. That's a, that's a, a mission. And, uh, you spoke in depth with, uh, Chef Marques Clark, so let's hear your recent conversation with him.

Dalia: Okay, so I first interviewed you in 2024.

Chef Marques: Yeah. Early parts.

Dalia: Yeah. And I know you're really trying to make strides toward, like, eliminating childhood obesity, diabetes, all these health outcomes.

Uh, have there been any wins that you can celebrate either, like, through your work or just in our culture?

Chef Marques: Well, I would [00:05:00] say for inspiration, um, aspects, I, I did achieve, um, the Community Hero Award this year.

Dalia: You did.

Chef Marques: And so that was a big, a- accomplishment under, under my belt because it definitely puts validity to the work that I'm doing.

And I also did a TEDx talk. And so for me, that was a big step toward the right direction because my message is... it says that my message is being heard and getting out there.

Dalia: That's incredible. Congratulations.

Chef Marques: Thank you.

Dalia: Okay, last time we talked about school lunch.

Chef Marques: Mm-hmm.

Dalia: School lunch is, is not a win.

Chef Marques: It's atrocious.

Dalia: It's atrocious.

Chef Marques: Yeah.

Dalia: Has it changed at all?

Chef Marques: Absolutely not. Listen, I, I, I gotta be honest with you. This is, maybe this one, you know, boils my blood when it comes to this discussion because my son and my children, they go to public schools, and the public school system is failing our children simply because of the ultra-processed foods that they're subjecting our children to.

Dalia: Okay, so, so what would the cafeteria be serving, and then what would you bring?

Chef Marques: Well, the [00:06:00] cafeterias are serving everything in a package. And so when you, when you get food that's packaged, you're getting food with a l- that's not food. You're getting food with a lot of ingredients, a lot of chemical, a, um, a lot of artificial flavoring and dyes in it.

For me, I'm bringing my son fresh foods like fruits, sandwiches that I made at home with love. And so we have to look at the aspect of that, too, that food is

not only just better for us overall ingredient-wise, but it's good for the hands that are preparing it as well. And so when we look at food overall, a child's mental health- It's better when they understand that, the love that went into the food that was prepared.

Dalia: I love that. And how you said they're getting food that's not food. I think that's gonna stick with me- ... because it is food. You are eating something. Yeah. But it's really not what-

Chef Marques: It lacks nutritional value. Yeah. Absolutely.

Dalia: Recently, my friend Janet Keeler was suggesting that maybe food desert is not the term we should have used.

Hmm. And she's not the first person to say this, but she sent me an [00:07:00] article about how a lot of people are leaning toward calling it maybe, um, food apartheid. Hmm. Because a desert suggests that this is- Yeah ... just a naturally occurring- Yeah,

Chef Marques: right.

Dalia: Absolutely ... a natural occurrence. Yes. But it isn't.

Chef Marques: Absolutely, because this is by design, and so we have to look at, uh, how did these, how did a food, quote-unquote, "food desert" get here?

Dalia: Yeah. And food touches everything. I mean, if you even look at our transportation system here in Tampa Bay, there could be a Sprouts or a Publix a couple miles away, but if you don't have a way to get there-

Chef Marques: Yeah, absolutely ...

Dalia: it might as well be across the country. So I'm really glad that you are getting ready to try and do something about this.

Oh,

Chef Marques: yeah. Okay. Absolutely.

Dalia: Yes. I was so excited when you sent me this information. Okay, you're riding. It sounds a little crazy-

Chef Marques: Yeah ...

Dalia: but you know what? We gotta do something radical- Yeah ... because we need radical change. Yes. You are riding on a bicycle 700 miles from the Florida Keys to the capital in Tallahassee.

Oh. Tell me, [00:08:00] first of all, what possessed you to do that? And then I wanna know all the things.

Chef Marques: Oh, goodness. Um, what possessed me to do it? Well, again, looking at my son's lunch tray.

Dalia: How old is he now?

Chef Marques: My son is nine now, and this was three, four years ago where his lunch tray was like that, and it's still like that to this day.

But to, uh, go into this ride that I'm doing, I call it the Ride Hunger Out of Florida From the Keys to the Capital. It's a ride that is going to petition for a ban on ultra-processed foods from all Florida public schools. And so this ride for me is a long journey, and it starts on October 11th, and it completes itself October 16th.

Why those two dates are significant, October 11th is World Diabetes Day to bring awareness to world diabetes. Yeah. And October 16th is World Food Day to bring awareness to more food and sustainable food systems and access to those who lack it. So those [00:09:00] significant six days is when I'm gonna be riding from the Keys to the Capitol.

Dalia: Okay. So how did you decide that a bike ride was the way to do it? And then take me through how you're training for this. What are you eating these days, by the way?

Chef Marques: Well, I'm, I'm, I'm eating the proper nutrition. You know, I'm eating my foods natural. I'm eating my foods whole. I'm following my own philosophy, the green, clean, lean protein philosophy.

You remember that. Oh,

Dalia: yeah.

Chef Marques: And I am... I'm following it to a T because I know that nutrition is very... I'm, I'm working out, putting on muscle because I'm gonna be burning a lot of energy on this ride. I'm definitely work- eating healthy, drinking all the proper liquids that I need, and I'm training, cycling for, you know, 20, 30 minutes a day on my, on my stationary bike, but also cycling on my actual bike, you know, 20, 30 miles.

I'm doing training rides, like, from Tampa to Orlando.

Dalia: What? I'm...

Chef Marques: Yeah, I'm doing training rides from Tampa- Do you Uber home? No, I'm not Uber. I, I'm riding home. But, um, but, um, I'm, I'm doing training [00:10:00] rides. I'm also doing a training ride next month from Miami to Key West, 120 miles. So I'm doing all these things to prepare myself for this grueling ride, and I'm, I'm up for the challenge, you know?

Dalia: That's incredible. Okay, I have a million more questions about that. So what are the logistics of doing something like this? I remember watching, I think it was Diana Nyad. Yes. She did a swim- Yes ... from, from the Keys to Cuba.

Chef Marques: Yeah, from Cuba to the Keys. And,

Dalia: yeah, and you have to have, like, your support team. So how are you doing this?

Do you have places in mind where you're stopping? Oh, yes. How are you gonna stay hydra- I'm concerned.

Chef Marques: Yes. You should be.

Dalia: As a friend, as a friend, I'm like- You should be ... is he drinking enough water?

Chef Marques: You should be. Um, I do have a team that only ride from dusk till dawn, sun up to sun down, to stay safe, and I have a rider that will be meeting me at the mile markers that I place on this route, because I'm only gonna be riding three hours before I take a break.

So three hours at a time.

Dalia: Okay.

Chef Marques: All right? And this is, three hours is nothing to sneeze at.

Dalia: No.

Chef Marques: You know, to get to the [00:11:00] capital, but- And

Dalia: it's still hot out.

Chef Marques: Oh, yeah, it's still hot out.

Dalia: October, it'll still be hot

Chef Marques: out. It's still gonna be hot. Oh.

Dalia: Okay, I'm feeling a little better about this.

Chef Marques: Yeah, absolutely.

Dalia: We'll be cheering you on.

Chef Marques: Yes.

Dalia: What happens when you arrive at the capital?

Chef Marques: Well, my goal for this is to get the governor to hear about this before we even get there, and I know that this is his, uh, last hurrah before he, he, he jumps out of office. This is something that I want him to take on, to sign and put into legislation, that we do need to regulate and bring more food security to our schools.

I think he can do this, 'cause his wife, she cares about this kind of a thing.

Dalia: Yeah.

Chef Marques: And, um, I put it on his table and, uh, he's gonna look at this and say, "Yeah, let's..." That's my goal. My goal is to get him to come out there with me at the capital, have people join me there, have people stand there, have the press there, whatever I need to have there to put this message out there.

Dalia: Yes. Mm-hmm. Ooh, I love it. Okay. How can people get involved? Somebody's listening, maybe they have money to donate. Maybe they just wanna follow you on this [00:12:00] journey. What's the next step for us?

Chef Marques: Well, right now, the way you can support is by going to change.org, Ride Hunger Out of Florida, and they can sign the petition.

The goal is to get 100,000 signatures, because you get 100,000 signatures, you get it on the ballot. You get it on the ballot, we can vote for it. We're petitioning for 100,000 signatures at change.org, Ride Hunger Out of Florida. And then my website, ridehungeroutofflorida.com. .

Dalia: [com](https://ridehungeroutofflorida.com). .

Chef Marques: [com](https://ridehungeroutofflorida.com).

Dalia: You're the perfect person for this.

I love your passion. I'm wishing you the best. Thank you so much.

Chef Marques: Thank you. Thank you for having me again.