

The Zest S13E5

Chef LaKisha: [00:00:00] In cooking, there's also a place for the way that my ancestors prepared their foods. And so let's talk about it and it's gonna be uncomfortable, and we're gonna have to say some things that you're not gonna like to hear. And we're gonna put some salt in our food. And it's not just gonna be one type of salt, it's gonna be four or five different types of salt.

Salt and just pepper. That's not enough.

Dalia: I am Dalia Colon, and this is Zest: citrus, Seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Today, a new approach to soul food.

One of our favorite events of the year is back, I'm talking about the Tampa Bay Collard Green Festival. If you know, you know it takes place on Valentine's Day this year, February 14th, in South St. Petersburg. This year's headliner is Chef LaKisha Harris from Muskegon, Michigan, she's the owner of Soul Filled Enterprises, which includes a restaurant and [00:01:00] catering business.

She's also a decorated member of the American Culinary Association, and she became the first African American woman to receive the Presidential Medallion Award from that organization last year. In addition, she's a collaborator on the James Beard Award-winning documentary *Cold Water Kitchen*, which follows the culinary program at the Lakeland, Michigan Correctional Facility and explores themes of rehabilitation.

How much do you love that? Not only did I chat with her in the conversation that you are about to hear, but if you're listening to this. On the day the episode comes out, which is February 12th, 2026, then you may have an additional opportunity to hear from Chef Harris tonight because I will be in conversation with her at the Collards after Dark event in St. Pete. Are there tickets left? I have no idea 'cause I'm recording this a week ahead of time, but either way, you are going to be moved and inspired [00:02:00] by this conversation with Chef Harris. You're gonna learn the surprising origins of fried chicken. Why? She says that the most authentic form of soul food is actually vegan food.

And she'll discuss how following her own path helped her cook up success. So here's my conversation with Chef LaKisha Harris.

Chef LaKisha: I think that food was my comfort early on the ninth. And my mother had two children, but she adopted seven. And so I was always the more mature, I was responsible, um, being the second oldest for bathing them, making sure they were ready for school 'cause she was working. My father was disabled, he was injured at work and so therefore food was my comfort and my mother was a caterer.

She was a professional chef, so everything we did was surrounded up around food. And then every day I literally grew up in the household where there was a dessert with every [00:03:00] meal. With lunch and with dinner, you know, and then there was sugar in your oatmeal and there was sugar in your GRS, and there was sugar on your rice.

And so I just naturally gravitated towards all of the wrong things. And I wasn't forced to drink water. I wasn't forced to eat my vegetables, and if I did, she put sugar on it.

Dalia: Wow.

Chef LaKisha: Course correcting was very difficult for me. Yeah.

Dalia: Okay. That's funny about the water. 'cause I have this conversation all the time.

I feel like my kids' generation is like the most hydrated generation. Yes. We got like three seconds at the water fountain and the next person, you know, these kids take water bottles everywhere and now so do I. Okay, so your mom being a caterer for more than three decades, what did you learn from watching her?

Like you talked about the sugar. What were some things that you decided to intentionally do differently from the way your mom did them?

Chef LaKisha: Initially? I did everything the way that she did it, because, you know, if we are looking at the early eighties, [00:04:00] early nineties, an African American female caterer head chef was, you know.

It was almost non-existent. A chef was considered to be a white male with a tall white hat on and a French accent. So she was a rarity, you know, and so I just assumed that her success meant that she did everything right and everything tasted very well. You know, I saw her not only cater to the African-American community, but the community at large.

Everyone loved her cooking. It was just, okay, this is how you eat. And I think when I went away, I studied abroad in Brazil and I was forced to eat food differently. And I'm like, okay, there's no sugar on their rice. There's not only no sugar on their rice, there's no sugar in the kitchen. And then in Brazil, your largest meal you eat at noontime, you don't eat it at the end of the day.

And so it was learning not to snack at night. Not to have sugars. They have a fruit called maja, which is our version of papaya. You know, learning fresh [00:05:00] tropical fruit. And I was like, oh no, I'm not feeling this, you know? But initially I didn't. I didn't realize in the long run my brain was learning to adapt.

It was learning to evolve. And so I remember my mother passed away very early. She was only 58 when she passed away. And I remember thinking. Of all things at the funeral, all of those recipes go into the ground. No one who's going to carry out this tradition, who's going to fulfill her catering calendar.

And it was in that exploration that I began to do things my own way. 'cause my mother didn't like. Hot peppers, but I liked spice in my food and so I started to learn how to play with, um, habaneros and jalapenos and through that, the evolution of using black pepper and making better choices for my diet.

And that's kind of how I arrived. So I. It wasn't that her way was wrong. I think with the evolution of thought, there [00:06:00] was a better way, and there's a way to make soul food approachable because people just assume that it's just this unhealthy cuisine and we fry everything and we bathe everything in butter and everything's drowned in sugar, and we do.

You know what I mean? But there's a reason behind that. And that goes back to the transatlantic slave trade that goes back to our survival mechanism. And so it's marrying our history with the present and then the promise of the future. Because when we came from Africa, we were vegan. We didn't eat meat.

We started to eat meat on the plantation because we needed the protein for the energy. So there's a story behind all of it, and that's where I'm exploring right now.

Dalia: Wow. I'm learning so much from you already since you brought up the fact that. Mostly we were eating vegan back then. You know, a lot of people think of like a, you know, fried chicken as soul food, but if you're enslaved, you don't have time to be killing a chicken.

Plucking the feathers, doing all that after a long day of, of free labor. Yes. So those foods were more of. [00:07:00] Celebration foods, not everyday foods. And the everyday foods were on the, the healthier side, leaning into more plant-based options. And I've noticed, I checked out your menu, made me very hungry. I'm a vegetarian, so this is like right up my alley.

But you do have a lot of vegan options. You've got the soul rolls, the cauliflower wings. Yes. Smothered mushrooms and all of that. Yes. What has been the, um, response from the African American community?

Chef LaKisha: Coincidentally with the emergence of, uh, soul food because soul food didn't even become a cuisine until the 1970s.

And so then we see here now in mid two thousands things like Atlanta and the resurgence of soul food coming to the forefront, they started making food. In the vegan form, and people started to love that play on their brain, you know? And so it's well received. And believe it or not, vegan soul is the largest growing and fastest growing [00:08:00] form of soul food.

Now what we take is the that impossible burger, or the greens, or the corn. We've always been eating hot water cornbread. We didn't know it was vegan. We've always eaten our greens, so we've just taken the pork out and we've put in some Florida vegetable stock or you know, more seasonings to add those flavors.

But we've always been an adaptable people. We've always adapted our mind, and so vegan food is probably the most authentic form of soul food because it is the evolution of our thought and it's, it's worked very well for me. Am I going to convert? Absolutely not. But I love the possibility of what it means for our culture.

Dalia: Yes. And I love the creativity of it. So then for the meat eaters listening, what are some of those meat dishes that they will find on your menu as well?

Chef LaKisha: So our meat dishes, we do one of, one of our most unique things is our Turkey knuckles. So Turkey knuckles you can only find in Muskegon, Michigan. They [00:09:00] originate here.

I grew up eating Turkey knuckles, and I remember traveling like. You guys don't have Turkey knuckles. And people thought I was crazy. They were like Turkey knuckles. What's a Turkey knuckle? So a Turkey knuckle is the

deconstructed thigh joint of the Turkey. You can only find 'em in Muskegon, Michigan. You can only get them here.

And so when I left neurosurgery and I moved back home in the. COVID coming out of a divorce, raising my daughter alone as a single mom, I'm like, I'm gonna highlight the Turkey knuckle and I want people all over the world to know what a Turkey knuckle is. And so people have come from, as far as Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, all over the United States.

Try these Turkey knuckles. And so I've been crowned, so to speak, the queen of the Turkey knuckle, and that's really just eating what I've always eaten as a child, has kind of taken the notoriety all over the world. So Turkey knuckles, we deep fry our ribs at my restaurant. Um, I have something called Get your man Fried [00:10:00] Wings.

That came from a supervisor who was dating this guy and she really liked him, and she was like, what can I cook tomorrow? I said, make some fried chicken. And she was like, okay, I'm gonna soak it in buttermilk. I'm like, no, don't soak it in buttermilk. Put it in yellow mustard. It serves as a binder to make the chicken adhere to the flour.

And she fried that chicken for them. They were married a year, year later. And then I just took on the. Get Your Man Fried Wings. So people come and it's so funny, they come to the restaurant and they say, can I have some get your man frat wings? You know? And so those are our top three sellers, our Catfish, um, we're known all over for that.

And it has really just been an amazing journey taking. What I've always eaten and using the modifications because you don't always have buttermilk. You don't always have these expensive spices and seasonings. And using that and seeing the world accept that as something that's amazing. It doesn't just taste good to me, it tastes good to everyone, and that blows my mind.[00:11:00]

Dalia: Okay. You mentioned that you were an exchange student in Brazil. I was an exchange student in Ecuador during college. So similar vibe. You speak what? Portuguese and Spanish? Yes. As if that wasn't incredible enough. Um. And I remember living in Ecuador and shifting the way that I eat. Like you said, the largest meal is, you know, around lunchtime for us.

Yes. And everything's fresh. I, I even stopped drinking cold water 'cause I couldn't afford it. I was just drinking room temperature water, which I absolutely like 20 something years later. So for people who don't get to have

that. International experience and have their whole way of thinking shifted so dramatically.

What are some mindset shifts that they can make? What are some maybe hacks to lean into healthier eating? Because it's hard to go from fried chicken to tofu like overnight.

Chef LaKisha: Absolutely. I think that I, I say this jokingly, but I say an African American [00:12:00] kitchen is a chopped kitchen. Every day we take what's there and we make a meal out of it.

So we have all of these resources available to us. Now, the internet. Bridges, Ecuador, where we don't have to be there. The internet brings Brazil to us. The internet brings Japan to us. So how does fish sauce, how can I mix fish sauce and Lowry seasoning salt and make it. Tastes like something. Well, I can take that tofu, I can soak it in fish sauce, which is what they would do in an Asian country.

Make it pliable. But then I'm gonna bring it back to the black household and I'm gonna put some seasoning salt on that, and I'm gonna put that in some flour. You know what I mean? And so it's using the resources that we have made available to us. It's an intentional journey to think beyond your natural thought.

And at the end of the day, if you don't like it, you don't have to commit to it. But you will find that the more you try, the [00:13:00] more you explore. Mushrooms have become such an amazing vehicle for so many things to replace meat. Mushrooms can almost be anything. They can taste like a steak. They can taste like fish because they take on the taste of whatever marinates and or seasonings.

That you give to it. So if you soak it in Italian dressing, it might taste like a meatball. If you chop it and you mince it finely and you put a little carrot with it and a little bit of celery and you add some seasonings, you can turn it into a hot dog, but it's a mushroom. So it's, it's really that intentionality of saying, I've always done it this way.

I'm gonna make an intentional choice to explore. And you don't have to even be able to spell. You say, Hey, Siri, how do I make. A mushroom hot dog and Siri tells you everything. And if Siri can tell you and says, can I refer you to chat GPT? Use those resources because they're available. You know, [00:14:00] I won't say my age, but this is my last year of the forties.

And I can remember we would go to the library, we would have to pull the books, we would have to check out the car catalog. You have to return the book, you know? Now my daughter just. Does everything right there on her tablet, you know? And so

Dalia: it's so much easier now, the whole world is open to you, and if you say, all right, I'm gonna cut back on fried food, or I'm gonna cut back on, you know, red meat or whatever, at first you feel like, oh no, my world is getting smaller.

But then you realize, no, my world is getting larger and larger because I'm following people like Chef LaKisha Harris. I'm going to the, you can still go to the library. You can check out cookbooks for free. Absolutely. You can check out a stack Absolutely. Of cooking magazines for free. Absolutely. Last week I asked Chad, GPT to come up with a recipe based on what I had in my house, and it actually was really good.

I was like, okay, I got some chickpeas, some coconut milk. What can I make? Yeah.

Chef LaKisha: Yeah. It's amazing. And you know, when we [00:15:00] look at the evolution of who we are, we were all one people. You know what I mean? Chickpeas did not belong to the Middle Eastern countries. Fried chicken is not african American food. It's Scottish frying chicken came from the Scottish.

What happened is that when we were on the plantations, we would get the chicken neck, the chicken butt, the chicken wing, which we love now, but it was the smaller part of the chicken, so the slave owners didn't want that. Frying is the fastest way to prepare something frying and or boiling, so that's why you see a lot of gumbos, a lot of stews, a lot of fried food because we didn't get a roast.

At 6:00 AM that we could slow cook all day. Believe it or not, there was not a barbecue pit on the plantation. It did not exist. That does not come from the African American culture. What we have done is we've taken those influences, and I like to say, and I could be partial, that we've perfected those.

Influences. We've perfected, we've taken [00:16:00] barbecue, which comes from South America. It's an open pit concept of a pit that's in the ground made of stones, which we see in biblical times as well when they are roasting gold and, and rabbit and those things. And you, you cook from the ground up. That comes from South America.

We take it, we take a. Something that we can contain and then we start to slow cook food. This was a privilege given to us. It was not a benefit. And so when we fry, when we boil, when we based, when we put it in butter, those are all enhancements because no one, they didn't want the lard. We found value in lard.

They didn't want, they thought that limes were bad, lemon. And so that's how key lime pie evolves. Believe it or not, red velvet cake. It came from our propensity to eat red foods because of the blood. And so when we go to a restaurant, it's very rare to see an African American person. Order a rare or medium steak because we don't believe that blood should run on your plate.[00:17:00]

So if someone says, well, you're eating a steak wrong when you order it medium well or well done to our culture, that is what's right because of our history. And so when you set the Chickpeas and Chat, GPT bringing all that together, it's a very small world. We allow it to be vast, but we all have that commonality.

Dalia: Wow. You're educating me. I love this. And I love the idea that when you go in the kitchen and you're not quite sure what to make or how it's gonna turn out, we're recalling our ancestors when we do that. So that's actually absolutely pretty cool.[00:18:00]

I did wanna ask you about this task force that you chair between Latino and African American chefs. Can you tell me more about that?

Chef LaKisha: So. Um, back in 2024, there was an opportunity to present for the American Culinary Federation. I just went through their website. There was not one African American chef represented there, and I thought, well, is this an exclusive?

So I became a part of the ACF in 2023 and I spoke to the executive director and I'm like, Hey. I've never seen a presentation on soul food. I've never seen anyone talk about the African American culture in the cuisine. And he says, well, I'll let you do a webinar. And it was the most attended, most talked about webinar for the ACF.

And so I'm like, well, you guys are going to Phoenix. I said, how would you feel about. A live expo. And so I went to Phoenix and I was the first African American woman to ever present on soul food in [00:19:00] 2024. And when I got there, there were African American and Latino chefs, literally in the audience, in tears.

And they were saying, how did you get this opportunity? They don't let us. Speak. You know, they don't give us these opportunities. And I'm like, what do you mean? You know? And that goes back to the rejection from my childhood. I said, I asked and I made sure that I met deadlines and I was ethical. I had integrity and I showed up where I was supposed to show up to.

And then from that, after the event, maybe three months later, I called the executive director again and I said, you know, this isn't uncomfortable conversation. I said, but there were so many chefs that came to me and said, you guys don't allow black chefs to speak. You know, allow Latino chefs to speak. And because I speak Spanish and Portuguese, and I understand those cultures.

I said, I wanna create a platform where we can be heard unapologetically. It's gonna be uncomfortable, you know? But who told you the way that you prepare [00:20:00] food is right. That was my question. Who told you that was right? Who? Who says that? You know, you have to do all these French techniques to have the perfect end product E while I.

Respect that there's a place for that in cooking. There's also a place for the way that my ancestors prepared their foods. And so let's talk about it and it's gonna be uncomfortable, and we're gonna have to say some things that you're not gonna like to hear. And we're gonna put some salt in our food.

And it's not just gonna be one type of salt, it's gonna be four or five different types of salt. Salt and just pepper is, that's not enough. You know who told you that was correct, but I learned how to make it approachable. And so when I formed a coalition of five Latino chefs and five African American chefs from all over, and we came together and then this year in Las Vegas, we did a joint presentation.

The Latino chefs did their own presentation. Three [00:21:00] African American chefs did their own presentation, and at that time we were a group of eight. Now there are over 119 African American and Latino chefs associated with the course, organization, and course is an acronym for culinary. Organization, unifying races through socialization and equity.

And I'm like, we need a course in life because when I leave this earth, 'cause I'd never gone to culinary school. This happened in my grandmother's kitchen. This happened in her garden sitting outside, you know, my grandfather would go and hunt and bring back a raccoon and we ate that for dinner and life taught me this so.

In my life lessons, how could I make this approachable? So another African American chef can say, I don't know French technique, but I know that my product is good. And Chef LaKisha helped to create a stage not only for me, but for. Other [00:22:00] people that are like me and we try now to authentically what what we're moving to now is doing the Latino Chefs presentations in Spanish.

Why would we do those in English? Let's bring you exactly to where we are. Find a commonality. You don't speak Spanish, so I need you to be uncomfortable for 30 minutes and see what that feels like. To be in a room and you have no idea what's going on, but you have to catch on because this is real life for us every day.

Dalia: Oh, I love it so much. And I keep coming back to your, um, idea of improving in the kitchen and using what you have and it builds confidence that you carry through the rest of your life so that you can do things like bring a chair to the table when you don't have a seat at the table. This is amazing.

Absolutely. We're just getting started because you are coming down for the Tampa Bay Collar Green Festival and I will interview you at Collards After Dark. So before we wrap up, I did wanna ask you, besides maybe getting a break from the Michigan winter, why was it important for [00:23:00] you to participate in this event?

Chef LaKisha: Initially when the opportunity presented itself to me, I thought, why would they choose me, you know, of all the chefs in the world, how, how did my name even get thrown in the hat? And it goes back to the American Culinary Federation, the president and his wife. They were like, okay, they were gonna bring in the celebrity chef.

Let's bring in Chef LaKisha Harris and that there became the improvisation. I said, okay, well if the door is open, I'm gonna walk through that door. And so I thought this would be a a, a time to bring Midwestern flair. To the south because authentically we believe that the South has the most genuine form of soul food influenced by Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama.

But guess what? My grandparents migrated north. We are still Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. We're just located Michigan, Indiana, u Ohio, you know, Illinois. And so I'm like, okay, we're [00:24:00] gonna bring the Midwest to the South and we're gonna see that. Even though many miles separate us, we are the same African American community, honey.

And whether you are in Muskegon, Michigan or Tampa Bay, Florida, black folks love collard greens. So you know what I mean? It is the vehicle, and we will have five different chefs there presenting one authentically from the islands. Chef Xavier Har. Mio, who is from, um, Jamaica Chef Jimmy Hill, he's a James Beard Award-winning chef.

Chef Dink Dawson, who was incarcerated and he's featured in the documentary Cold Water Kitchen. So he was incarcerated and became a five star chef after incarceration. Chef Derek Tucker, who's a barbecue guy, and then comes below me and I am going to take the remnant. What's left from there? Live demonstrations, and I'm gonna make a meal right there on the spot, no recipe, because that is [00:25:00] authentic soul food cooking.

I don't know what I'm gonna get. I don't know what's gonna be left over, but whatever you give us, we can make a cuisine from it. And so. This Collard green Festival is, is the perfect marriage between North and South. And why wouldn't I not want that amazing opportunity for all of us to share?

Dalia: Ooh, I'm so excited for this.

I will be there. So you'll be there, uh, Thursday evening for a ticket event, and then Saturday, which is Valentine's Day. So, um, yes. Yeah, so that'll be fun. Perfect way to show love to yourself, your family. Is there anything else we didn't talk about that you wanna mention?

Chef LaKisha: No, I'm just excited about coming to Tampa.

I'm excited about the possibility of what's what this means for all of us. Everyone thinks they make a mean collard green, but. You could go to 50 different households and you're gonna have 9,000 different forms of collard greens. And so I'm just excited to see the manifestation of that. I'm excited about collards after dark and celebrating black [00:26:00] excellence and being able to dress up and be chic and eat soul food, but in a very posh way.

And so I'm just excited about all that. This means, you know, I'm ex as excited to be there as for the opportunity to present as well. Yeah,

Dalia: and I should mention, we talked a lot in this conversation about African-American food ways, but this is an event for everybody. Black, absolutely White, Hispanic, Asian, everybody comes all ages, and that's why I think it's one of the most successful festivals in Tampa Bay because it really is a community festival.

So if you are not a member of the African American community, we want you to come out, this is your festival too.

Chef LaKisha: And that's what soul food is. Soul food is food for the soul. Whether you're Italian, whether you're German, whether you're Japanese, it is that safe place where you felt loved, where you felt cared for, where you felt nourished through food.

Soul food is not a color, it is a mindset. And so I'm excited about all of the influence and what I will learn from the, [00:27:00] uh, festival as well. So I think that's a, that's a great point.

Dalia: Thank you so much. Thank you.

That's Chef LaKisha Harris of Muskegon, Michigan. She shared her recipe for Get Your Man Fried Chicken just In Time for Valentine's Day, and it's on our website, the zest podcast.com. That's also where you'll find all the details about tonight. Collards After Dark Event. If you happen to be listening to this episode on February 12th when it comes out, and of course, the main event, the Tampa Bay Collard Green Festival on February 14th in South St. Pete, it is free and open to the public. By the way, if you do go to the Collard Green Festival on the 14th, be sure to stop by the WUSF public media booth. We've got some fun swag and we would love to meet you. Now, I was touched by many of the things that Chef Harris mentioned in our conversation, but the thing that really got me was fried chicken originated in [00:28:00] Scotland.

That was one of those moments for me that I decided to fact check, and of course she knows her stuff. Of course she was right. But you don't have to take my word for it. You don't have to take her word for it. There's a fantastic article on the BBC's website written by James Beard, award winner and former Zest guest Adrian Miller, better known as the Soul Food Scholar.

So we have a link to that article in our show notes or@thezestpodcast.com. I know that was a lot, but there's a lot happening this weekend. How fortunate are we to have. People like Chef Harris coming to town. I'm Dalia Colon. I hope to see you at the Collard Green Festival on Saturday. I produce Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF, copyright 2026, part of the NPR network.