# The Zest S13E15

**Michael:** [00:00:00] Some people go way harder than I do, but my thing is just making a very gentle approach and just saying, okay, we're gonna have the health conversation. How do we do that in a way that's respectful? That also draws when people already have sweet potatoes in their natural form. Okra, black eye peas, beans, right, and so forth.

**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. Looking back toward a healthier future.

Michael Twitty is not giving up his Klondikedike bars. On April 29th, the celebrated food historian will appear at the foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg for a free public event discussing how we can apply our ancestors, culinary traditions to live a healthier life. And if you're interested, you can find a link to register for that event.[00:01:00]

In the show notes, wherever you're listening to this episode or on our website, the zest podcast.com. But even as we strive to eat healthier, Twitty says there's still room for the occasional treat based in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Twitty is the author of several groundbreaking books, including the James Beard Award-winning *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African-American Culinary History in the Old South.*

These other books include *Kosher Soul*, *Rice, and his latest Recipes from the American South.* You might also recognize Twitty from his appearances on shows like Bizarre Foods America, the incredible Netflix docuseries High on the Hog, Taste the Nation with Padma Lakshmi and Michelle Obama's Waffles and Mochi.

Incredible. Now ahead of his visit to St. Pete Twitty chatted with me about culinary lessons from our ancestors, how ingredients change as they migrate throughout the Southern US and how he [00:02:00] enjoys his soul food favorites while keeping a kosher kitchen.

**Michael:** For me, I always go with the idea that our ancestors had simpler lives. In some ways. In some ways, and as a part of those lives, they made food systems that work for them. They didn't know what a food desert worth. That wasn't really in their worldview because they knew the, from the first obligations in self-care is to feed yourself and nourish your community.

So we're gonna be talking about how we can do that. Also, talking about drawing on the cultural resources that, um, central and South Florida have to offer. We, you know, it's one of the few places where you have, uh, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Haitian, Afro Lattin communities all in the same space. And also contributing to each other's welfare and being and, and cultural life for generations.

And so we're gonna talk about that. And we're also gonna have like a lot of dialogue, a lot more [00:03:00] dialogue with the community saying, well, how do I do this? How can I make this work? Um, I don't have, I have a small plot. I have no plot at all. How can I raise, you know, vegetables and create, produce and also forage in my community and create food forests. So we're gonna the basics of all these things, but also, I mean, I'm here to learn from the community. I'm here to learn from St. Petersburg. I'm here to learn from Floridians and asking the question, how do we do this in a way that honors who we are, remembers who we've been? 'cause all black communities, honestly.

Even black urban communities found a way to make this work until, of course the highway came through our part of town or we were gentrified or something else happened that was sort of a passive aggressive Jim Crow and white supremacy. And if you can't, if you don't talk about those things, you can't really address how our food works, but also, you know, making a better food system for our communities also involves reversing those [00:04:00] trends as well as talking about the unique health pressures and issues that black people in America have.

**Dalia:** Oh, that's so interesting. There's so much there I hadn't thought about. Sort of going back to go forward, we like to think of ourselves.

What'd you say?

**Michael:** Sankofa.

**Dalia:** Okay. Yes. Yes. So we like to think that we're so advanced. I mean, how could we possibly learn anything from our ancestors? They didn't have Uber Eats and they didn't have Instacart deliveries. So what are some of those takeaways that we should still be incorporating into our modern life?

**Michael:** So if you have a can, coffee can, you have a garden? Nowadays, there's also little things you can do, the herbs and things and why is it important? It may just be a few herbs, but herbs are also medicine. Herbs are

also healing and I'm sure somebody would go, well, not like the pharmacy and the doctor. Okay, I get all that.

But here's the thing. My goal is not [00:05:00] to, to just have a bunch of pills and plastic be our solution. It's also to just take things that can help you. Like for example, cinnamon and okra have have qualities that can help you regulate blood sugar. Okay. Capsacin in peppers. I've known it for a long time.

Internal and also external thing. Although I would say please don't make your own glow Cayenne lotion, that can go real, real fast. And I ain't gonna say nothing else to keep this perfectly G rated. Um, but even, even having like spices in your diet like turmeric. Ginger, anti-inflammatory capsaicin from hot peppers, blood circulation.

I mean, these are basic things that keep you at a at a certain state, and these are also deep parts of our cooking. When I went to Ghana, I remember watching the women make. The, and then they call it, uh, Sanka Bowl, which has grooves in it, and they would grinding and making these in these little grooves, the spice mixture, that was the basis of many of the [00:06:00] soups and many, the many, the, the, the stews.

And you would take some ginger and some turmeric and hot pepper. Anything from cayenne to scotch bonnet, which is more, well, very common, the little tiny peppers that they can do real damage. And you're kind of putting 'em together and you're thinking, okay, I'm basil too. African basil and you would pull these things together and it, the food would not just be a dish that she would eat.

Be tasty. Of course it's tasty and spicy and wonderful, but also medicinal. Okay. Um, the Caribbean sour, so ssi, you know, all these things that are byproducts of other fruits and herbs are also now things that can help your body, your. High blood pressure, people who are pre-diabetic, all these things that plague our community because of our unique history as formerly enslaved people.

Critical. So it's having people understand that much like [00:07:00] Indian and Chinese cuisine. And I say that in the generic sense, not in that there, there's not one of any of those. Is the idea that African based cuisines also have a of a, a gradient where it's like, okay, first let's address the issue of your basic health needs.

Your basic, your, your stability from day to. And that's why those things are in there. I mean, we've, people don't even think about the fact, a lot of our common

pairings and our food that we as Americans in the 21st century used to say, for example, apples, fried apples, those the yummy apples used to sell it.

Boston Market, uh, apple pie, apple cob, apple crisps. Why is always with cinnamon. The cinnamon helps regulate the sugar. And apple, they didn't know that, but they knew it. You know what I'm saying?

**Dalia:** Mm-hmm.

**Michael:** Or why beef and broccoli or protein and broccoli. Because one of you know, one helps you deal with processing that mean in your body.

Yeah.

**Dalia:** Interesting. Okay. I can get over the, the Boston Market reference. I don't, I didn't even know Boston Market was still around, but that's irrelevant. So this is, it's, it's not, okay. [00:08:00] RIP to Boston Market, but a few weeks ago I spoke with Karen Two Shoes, who's a nutritionist for the Seminole Tribe of Florida in the Miami area.

And I'm seeing a lot of parallels between what you're saying and what she's. Thing because she's about getting indigenous people off their diabetes medication, you know, lowering the obesity rate and all these things through returning to traditional indigenous foods and, and you're saying something similar, but through African food ways and African American foods.

So why is it important for us to consider our cultural traditions when we're trying to get healthier? Why not just give everybody a pill or tell everybody to eat cottage cheese?

**Michael:** Because our ancestors didn't need cottage cheese.

**Dalia:** Plus it's gross. Yes,

**Michael:** right. They, they didn't. Here in America, I remember lasagna.

Listen, when I discovered lasagna, you really needed ricotta instead of cottage cheese. I was liberated. I was free. I said, give us us free, because it [00:09:00] didn't make sense to me, but it was 'cause what people could afford. Right? Uh, and I think it's really critical for people to understand that, you know, at the end of the day, people eat what they're gonna eat with their tradition dictates to them what they're familiar with.

We're not big on dairy. A lot of us are lactose intolerant, mildly lactose intolerant. We're not, we, we love pasta and other things, but we shouldn't really be. As in love with, it should be much more of a treat food for us, because that wasn't our thing. Wheat wasn't our thing. It was yams, cassava, soga, millet, rice, and you can eat millet people, most people see millet in the grocery store every day, but it's in the form of bird seed.

**Dalia:** Okay?

**Michael:** That's what bird seed is. It's millet. But for most West Africa, that is in one form or another part of the diet, you know, and it's gluten free. Okay, so I'm just thinking about this in the perspective of how can we take a little bit of what we're used to? You know, when you're hungry, what do [00:10:00] you go for?

Something usually gluten this and high in carbohydrates.

**Dalia:** Totally. Pasta with cheese. The two things you just told me not to eat. Right,

**Michael:** right. I mean, pizza, I mean, we love pizza, we love pasta, but I've, and I'm have a rule in my household, we cannot eat one of those more than once a week. I'm not a big health food person.

It's not a thing, but I'm also like more of a common sense person. I'm getting older. I'm almost 50 years old. I, I realize I can't do certain things the way I used to, but also, I don't like the nagging finger. If you don't eat this, you're not healthy, da da da. Our people don't wanna hear that, and it makes it difficult to kind of pass these things on.

Some people go way harder than I do, but my thing is just taking a very general approach and just saying, okay, we're gonna have the help conversation. How do we do that in a way that's respectful, that also draws when people already have sweet potatoes in their natural form, okra, black eyed peas, beans, right?

And so [00:11:00] forth. Fresh fish, um, lean proteins, all that's good for you. Oh, it's great. Um, how do we integrate that into a system? Now we have other international foods that we're being exposed to. I don't know, a black family doesn't have a dobo in their house now. It's part of the seasoning that we use that comes from the Filipino community.

And I'm just saying, look at all of it. There isn't, you know, I went to tell you this. There is a, um, African heritage food pyramid that was done by old ways many years ago. It's still out there. I

**Dalia:** remember

**Michael:** so old ways. Yeah, so always African heritage food pyramid. So check that out and think about, well, okay, how does this apply to me?

What things are gonna be really good? And also check, check out the Latin American on one as well. Compare and contrast and make your own food pyramid. As a family,

**Dalia:** we need to. My husband's Puerto Rican. I'm African American, so we are the poster child for making our own food pyramid. Yeah,

**Michael:** there you go.

There's, in other words, I'm gonna tell the [00:12:00] community, there's ways to actually talk to them and ask them. So how do you do that already? What are some things that you do? What are some health and food practice that you already have as you can share with your neighbors? It's about community. It's about.

Preparing food as a community, and that's also part of the health practice is making food as a community, making food with your family, multi-generations, making food with your children, you know, make having something that you can pass on to the next generation.

**Dalia:** That's beautiful.

And then you're, you're telling us that we should adapt. It for our own family. What [00:13:00] works for us, and I know that you keep a kosher kitchen. Your newest book is *Recipes from the American South*, so what's a southern dish that you've adapted so that you can still enjoy it while remaining faithful to your Jewish values?

**Michael:** I did a whole book called *Kosher Soul*, which is a food memoir with recipes, more recipes than most food memoirs have, and so there's a lot of goodies in there. I think a recipe I need to like nab from my friend, chef David and Tanya Thomas. David is a three time chopped champion is David and

Tanya are Muslim, and so they turned me on to a old school Maryland favorite, which has stuffed ham.

But because they're Muslim and I'm Jewish, uh, he turned, he turned into stuffed lamb. And so what you do is you take the lamb roast and you put big bunches of collard and mustard and turnip greens in it, and parsley and green onions. And spices, and you put gases in the [00:14:00] meat. You put the, so when you slice the meat, it has these beautiful ridges of, you know, greens and the, you know, reddish brownness of the meat and all that flavor.

Great. But you know, we've had kosher gumbo for generations. We've had, you know, I do a lot of red rice and jollof rice and jamaya. And then, you know, if, if, even if you, if you, if you wanna push a little bit further, some people hate this, but I actually enjoy it. There is actually a product. Now, this is where we get to the ultra process and I'm just going to, you know, have to, you know, deal with it.

But, um, there is a, a product called Kosher Shrimp.

**Dalia:** What?

**Michael:** Yes. It's just like, it's, it's basically the same thing as, not the same thing. It's not quite the same thing. You know how people have like the imitation grab?

**Dalia:** Yeah.

**Michael:** Well, even, and it's even like formed into fake strip. And so when it comes, and it really honestly, with Old Bay on it, all you take is Old Bay, right?

So it's just like, this is what we have. But I [00:15:00] mean, we do that in so many different ways. We have been doing this for generations, especially black Jewish cooks and Jewish families in the South. So it's, you know, it for me. It's fun because we just did Passover, we did West African brisket, we did jollof rice, stuffed collard greens.

You know, we just had all the goodies, matza ball soup done with Senegalese style, with like, you know, specific herbs and spices in it. And so yeah, it's, it's a lot of fun to keep both.

**Dalia:** Oh, that sounds incredible. I actually grew up in like a Jewish neighborhood in Cleveland. I thought it was weird that I wasn't having a bat mitzvah.

Right. My best friend is Jewish, and so we did a lot of those mashup holidays. That's so much fun. You've already mentioned some southern foods. You mentioned me, which already tells me you're from the South, so what are some ways that we see. Southern ingredients change as we travel throughout the south, because I think some people think of southern food as [00:16:00] one thing, but you know, Florida's the south.

Texas is the South Virginia is the south. How do these foods change as they travel across the south?

**Michael:** It's all about migration. It's about migration and movement. So in this case, this is what we're talking about. We're talking about the fact that people start off in the seaboard, the Gulf. They move in and they move across.

Um, they move into the mountains down from Pennsylvania, um, Maryland and Virginia. They go into the mountains. They also take those mountains and move into the Ozarks. They come from South Carolina and spread all the way across into East Texas, but also North Texas from Kentucky and Tennessee, Missouri. Um, and then people go to Chicago and they invent new ways to do barbecue.

Um, there's a barbecue and they got a glass, kind of glass smoker, which is very unique to Chicago. These people from Mississippi, they never did that in Mississippi, but they did in Chicago, or people would come up to New York. [00:17:00] And of course their, you know, cuisine from the, especially the Carolina people, low country, were mixed with Jamaican food and, and Haitian food.

Uh, now West African food in, in, uh, Brooklyn and in, uh, Harlem, um, out west, people from Louisiana came to the Bay area to LA and they brought gumbo, but they didn't have blue crab, but they had dungeons crabs, though. They changed it there. Pacific Northwest, they emphasized the berries and the fruit and made, they went from having just a huckleberry cobble to a, to a, um, poison berry cobbler.

You know, so, so many different ways in which we took new ingredients on and transformed them. Hot water, corn bread and water cornbread came from Texas to New Mexico, but then people started putting like hatch chili in them. That's

what you ate there. You know what I'm saying? So there was this constant sort of like both replication and, and movement and migration.

It morphed and it changed to meet the needs of the community wherever it [00:18:00] went.

**Dalia:** Oh. All right. We gotta start to wrap this up 'cause my mouth is literally watering. I gotta go eat lunch. You are making me hungry. We need to have you at the Tampa Bay Collar Green Festival. Have you heard of it?

**Michael:** Oh, no. Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Tell me more.

**Dalia:** Oh my gosh. I would, everyone would just go crazy for you. It's, um, every President's Day weekend in South St. Pete, which is a historically black part of St. Petersburg, but it attracts thousands of people. And actually the 10 year anniversary is coming up in 2027, but it attracts thousands of people every color, every age, and it's all about health and community.

And I just. You would fit right in. That would be just a, a dream. Oh, I

**Michael:** love that.

**Dalia:** I'll, I'll have to mention you to, uh, Boyzell and Samantha who put it on, but I'm not here to work for them. Um, I did wanna ask you, what are you working on now?

**Michael:** A lot. A lot. I've got proposals to get in. I've got stuff to do. I've, I've applied for a Guggenheim, which I hope to find out about very soon.

Probably by the time I get to Florida, I'll know what that, what [00:19:00] that went to. I submitted a couple of, um applications for fellowships is the Folger, um, Shakespeare library in Washington. So I can work on this project about African Americans and, um, the British Isles and the different cultural and social connections between those two places.

This project's called Father Country. So I'm working on that as we speak, but that's in earnest. It's just, I'm just getting started.

**Dalia:** Wow, you are just getting started in so many ways. Thank you for your time. I know you're about to give a talk. Thank you. Last question. So you said that you mostly eat, you know, whole Foods and traditional foods, but then, you know, you gotta have a little fun too.

So what's one of your maybe guilty pleasures?

**Michael:** Ah, you know what? Klondikedike Bar.

**Dalia:** Okay.

**Michael:** Every, every couple of months I'll, you know, I always kind of conveniently forget about it. And me, and me and my spouse will get a thing of Klondike bars and we'll work that about three [00:20:00] weeks and then all of a sudden, oh no, the Klondike bars are gone.

**Dalia:** Man,

**Michael:** but I mean, it's just kind of, you know, those kind of fun things. Somebody asked me today, where would you, where do you go for your brother? What, what's special? What's special? Man, I say anything I can't cook, but the problem is I cook what I like and I like what I cook.

**Dalia:** Right. You are just so much fun.

I always learn something from your books and it was a treat to talk to you in person. So thank you. We'll see you in a few weeks in uh,

**Michael:** absolutely.

**Dalia:** And St. Petersburg. Is there anything else you wanted to mention?

**Michael:** I just want to encourage everybody to come out, and this is gonna be a really fun event. There will be food, there'll be conversation.

It's not gonna be stodgy. It's gonna be an opportunity to really, um, make more community and new community and network. And I just really appreciate the community bringing me down there and have these St. Pete, especially now with all of our cultural and political and sociopolitical issues going on. We need each other more than ever.

So you know, please, let's be family.

**Dalia:** Yes. I love that. And I said a few weeks, but you listening, by the time you're hearing this, it's time to get in your car and drive to St. Pete. Yeah to [00:21:00] see Michael. Amazing. Thank you so much. This was a blast.

**Michael:** Thank you. You too.

**Dalia:** Michael Twitty is a James Beard Award-winning food historian and author who is coming to St. Pete. How lucky are we? The event is on April. 29th at the Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg, and you can find a link to register for the free event wherever you're listening to this episode right there in the show notes or on our website, the zest podcast.com. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron.

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