

The Zest S13E2

Rodney: [00:00:00] It is a very hard flavor to pin down and describe in words, but it's, I don't know. It tastes like home.

Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and Southern Charm possessed, celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State today.

Glorious guava. You know it when you smell it, but how do you put into words the indescribable scent of guava. And then there's the taste sour on its own, but irresistibly sweet in a guava and cream cheese pastry, which I am craving right now, or a pint of guava ice cream from Publix, which I just learned in this conversation is a thing.

So for a lesson in all things guava, we turn to historian Rodney Kite-Powell of the Tampa Bay History Center. In this episode, you'll learn the fruit's role in the creation of modern Tampa, which by the way is nicknamed the Big Guava. You'll also learn why Ybor City's [00:01:00] iconic Guava Ween Festival became sort of a victim of its own success, and we'll talk about why the guava industry remains.

Small but mighty. So grab a pastelito and a cup of cafe con leche and settle in for this enlightening conversation.

Rodney: Tampa exists allegedly because of the guava, at least, uh, modern Tampa because the cigar industry, and that may be more myth than fact. I think of this wonderful writer from the Tribune named Steve Otto, who dubbed Tampa "The Big Guava", I think of guava and cream cheese pastry. Um, my mother-in-law makes an amazing kind of guava cake, and so it is something that whether or not.

It did lead to the beginning of the cigar industry in Tampa. It has really become one of our really important kind of, uh, ingredients in the meals of Tampa

Dalia: for sure. You're already blowing my mind by saying that guava possibly led to the creation of Tampa. I've never heard [00:02:00] that. Oh, say

Rodney: more. So the story goes and, and there's, there's history, there's myth, and you know, we live somewhere in the middle of all that.

Uh, but the story goes that a man named Gavino Gutierrez, who was actually a friend of Vicente Martinez Ybor and Ignacio HHaya was traveling between New York and Havana, and there were two important things about Gutierrez for our story. One is that he easily became seasick and two, uh, one of his many businesses or, or jobs was that he worked for a, a fruit importer exporter.

And so he tried to travel overland between New York and Havana as long as he could before he had to get on a boat. And for a long time that meant getting to Jacksonville, but the railroad had finally arrived in Tampa, Henry Plant connected Tampa with the rest of the world. By a railroad in late 1883. So Gutierrez now is taking a train to Tampa, where then get on a boat and go to Havana.

But he also had heard that there were these kinda wild groves of [00:03:00] guava trees growing in the Tampa area. And so he thought, well, not only am I gonna be able to not get seasick for a little bit longer, but I can see if there are these guava trees that I've heard about. And you know, we can maybe buy some land and we can start harvesting them and, and, you know.

Kind of making it part of their import export business. Well, there weren't these wild stands of guava. Guava did grow in in Florida at that time. It's not native to Florida, but it was growing here by that time. But he didn't find what he was looking for and from guavas. But what he did find was a coastal city that had real connections to the north, shipping connections to the south, and likely a pretty willing board of trade.

So he talked to his friends, Ybor and Haya, who had been looking for a new place to. But their cigar factories and they came to Tampa, they like what they saw and kind of literally the rest is history.

Dalia: Stop.

Rodney: Yeah.

Dalia: So it's kind of like a Christopher Columbus scenario. Yeah. Like I didn't find what I was looking for, but like I think I can work with this.

Rodney: Exactly.

Dalia: Wild.

Rodney: Yeah. And the interesting kind of irony of it is, I guess if that's the right [00:04:00] term to use, because of so many Cubans coming here before the cigar industry, a lot of them brought their taste of guava. So even though there weren't a lot of guava trees here, there already were, but even more began to be planted here.

And so even if the guava wasn't the reason why the cigar industry came here, interestingly enough, they still arrived here because of the cigar industry.

Dalia: Wow. Okay. So if it's not native to Florida. Where did Guava originate?

Rodney: So, guavas are a, a new world plant, uh, but they really are native to Mexico, uh, central South America, and I believe even in the Caribbean.

And so they just hadn't made it to kind of mainland North America, I guess, other than Mexico, until they were brought here. But if you look even, you know, you can look in the newspaper in the 1860s even, and you'll see. Stories of guavas being harvested here, actually here in Tampa, uh, it was part of the produce that was being shipped out of Tampa, including oranges and, you know, lemons and limes and things like that.

But guavas were part of that. So there [00:05:00] was some truth to the fact there were guavas living here, but not in this kind of immense force of guava that that Gutierrez may have had in mind.

Dalia: Interesting. Guava started growing in my backyard about a year ago.

Rodney: Just at random.

Dalia: Yes. And it would drop onto my kid's trampoline and we're like, what is this?

Where did it come from? And then I've noticed it too, in our neighborhood when I'm just walking the dog, we have wild guava.

Rodney: There you go. Well, I mean, you know, that's Plants are. Propagated by animals. You know, either they're, they carry the seeds one way or the other. And so, and you know, orange is gonna not to get sidetracked to a different, uh, a different fruit.

No. All fruits, all fruits matter. I know. But, um, you know, of course oranges aren't native to Florida either. They're not even a, a new world plant. They're an

old world plant. But because the Spanish brought them here, even in the 15 hundreds, they did grow wild. And so there were literally, you know, wild groves of oranges growing.

By the 16, 17 hundreds. And so it makes sense that guavas, you know, of course could have the same thing. And there are, there are lots of homes. [00:06:00] In Tampa. Uh, and I think Tampa's probably as far north as Guavas will really grow well, um, because it just gets too cold for them. Um, but there, there are plenty of homes that have, uh, or certainly had guava trees growing in their yards.

Hmm.

Dalia: So, I don't know if you know this, but what was. People's sort of opinion of guava. Like if you came from Cuba, then it reminded you of home and you're into it. But say, you know, you came down on the railroad and now you're staying at the Tampa Bay Hotel, you know, which is now the Plant Museum. Is it, is it a delicacy?

Is it an everyday item that's found in every home?

Rodney: Well, no. Well, generally, the way guava was kinda sent out into the world so to speak, wasn't as the fresh fruit that you would consume. Of course you can, but it really is, is processed and so guava jelly, guava paste, uh, other kinda guava extracts, that's really that how people would've, would've.

Come in contact with guava and I gotta say peanut butter and guava sandwiches are pretty amazing.

Dalia: Oh, you're blowing my mind. Yeah, it's amazing.

Rodney: And then the other thing is, and this is something [00:07:00] that is very Tampa. They're probably very Cuban, is the little, the hard Cuban crackers with a slice of cream cheese and a slice of the.

The guava paste, and so that is how people would, you know, we guess how we consume guava today, but that's how it would've been consumed in the past as well.

Dalia: You know, it's crazy because it hasn't changed much the way we consume it. We love our guava marmalades and our guava paste, and we love a good guava pastry.

Oh, and you can get those Absolutely. At Publix. Mm-hmm. You can get them at. Columbia restaurant. Mm-hmm. You know the corner store. Exactly. And I've seen it churched up a little bit as the kids say, with like a croissant or you know, a guava, oh boy. There was like a guava matcha latte trend last summer. Oh, for stop.

I will not. Yeah, it's wild. But at its core, people still go back to that guava pastry. So how did you consume guava growing up? Are you from Tampa? I'm

Rodney: from Tampa. Okay. And so, yeah, no, I, I, you know, guava pastry is something that was, you know, common, you know, growing up. And then my, uh, my [00:08:00] wife's family, uh, on her mom's side is, is from West Tampa.

They. Arrived here from Spain through Cuba in the, uh, early 19 hundreds. And so they're very steeped in the guava, which is why my mother-in-law can make these wonderful guava cakes. But yeah, that's, that's how, and you know, you have a guava tree. Have you ever just tried taking a bite of just fresh guava?

Dalia: Yeah. And I wanted to talk to you about that because it's not a winner. No, it's not in my book's.

Rodney: Not, no.

Dalia: How can something be so kind of. Gross on its own, but then you, you, you finagle it a little bit and suddenly it's amazing. And I wanted to ask you to describe the smell and the taste of guava. It's hard to put into words.

I told you we have some wild guava in my neighborhood and one day I opened the front door and. I immediately smelled it. Mm. I immediately recognized the smell and I looked down and on the doormat, my neighbor had left like a grocery bag full of guava. Oh, wow. And I could smell it before I even mm-hmm.

Saw it. So, so how do we do [00:09:00] that? How do you sort of put into words that smell and then the taste,

Rodney: you know. I, it, it's a really, it is hard to pin down 'cause it, it is sweet. It's a little tart. It's certainly, the paste is quite sticky. It's mild. It, it definitely isn't a strong flavor. It's its own thing you think about, you know, is it just like kind of peach, like, well, no, not at all.

Is it kinda strawberry? Like, uh, not really. You know, it, it's, and you know, people have compared it, you know, historically to, to apples in the sense where there are a lot of varieties of apples and they all have a slightly different taste. And it's the same with guava. So I'm kinda curious what. Uh, generally here in Florida, we can only grow two over the varieties.

There's the kind of red, pink variety and then the white variety, and the white, I think is, is less sweet than the red pink one. But yeah, it's, it's, it is a very hard flavor to. Kind of pinned down and describe in words, but it's, it, it kind of tastes, I don't know. It tastes like home. It tastes like Mm, it tastes like, uh, it's like a, just a sweet, but not overly sweet.

It's, it, it's, it's, [00:10:00] it's right in the kinda wheelhouse of, of sweet. It's heart and, and just wonderful.

Dalia: Yes, we have the white.

Rodney: Okay. In

Dalia: my yard.

Rodney: Maybe that's why it doesn't taste a good raw, because I, because I have, I've had the, the pink raw. And it's not terrible. Um, but it's not great. It definitely, it needs processing.

Dalia: Yeah. But it smells so good. So you wanna, I know, go crazy picking it and then you're like, okay, now what do I do?

Rodney: Yeah. Well make jelly.

Dalia: Yeah.

Rodney: Yeah. I

Dalia: think I, I think I might need to do that this weekend.[00:11:00]

Okay, you referred to Apples, and I'm thinking about people. In the 18 hundreds, early 19 hundreds, who came from up north? I'm from Ohio originally. Mm-hmm. So I love an apple, but then you come here and you can't grow apples. No. So did guava sort of become the substitute for some of those other fruits that people were used to?

Rodney: Possibly, you know, because, you know, we can't obviously grow everything here, but we can grow a lot of stuff here. And so there is just an kind of endless list of fruits that we can grow here and so that we do make preserves and, and other things out of. And so I don't think guava would necessarily been a replacement for one of those, particularly because you can't really eat them.

Raw, you know, maybe, I think honestly, oranges, strawberries, things like that would've really been from a fresh fruit standpoint. Even peaches. You know, we can grow peaches not [00:12:00] quite this far south, but we can get 'em. Readily available even back then with the limitations of supply. Um, where trying ship apples down here would've been really hard pineapples.

They, they grew up and still do, grow abundantly here in Florida, so that those probably would've been more of your fresh fruit replacements for something like an apple. But guava again, you look in the, the, the Northern Papers. There are articles about, about the benefits of, of guava. They're very healthy.

That's the other thing I haven't talked about. They're extraordinarily healthy and even processed. I think they're still pretty healthy. I mean, obviously a little higher sugar content, but they would've been, I think, not unrecognizable, but certainly if someone coming down here, I think the biggest thing like we've been saying is they would've seen maybe a guava tree.

Picked one off that looked fresh and take a big bite and like, Ugh, what is this? But then maybe going down to the, you know, going into Igor and seeing, oh wow, there's a Cuban pastry. What does that taste like? And then like, oh, this, this is what it's all about.

Dalia: Mm. I'm so hungry now and I just ate breakfast.

Okay. You mentioned that. The Tampa Tribune writer Steve [00:13:00] Otto dubbed Tampa, The Big Guava. Mm-hmm. Obviously New York is The Big Apple. Exactly. Do you think that name fits?

Rodney: It does, but particularly 'cause he did it so, so tongue in cheek, you know, he was a kind of an irreverence columnist for the Tampa Tribune and, and in Tampa when he, when he made that moniker up, we were, this was the early, the mid eighties.

We were a city that we kind of felt we were up and coming. Uh, literally we were calling. Called America's Next Great City. So we, we had a little bit of a inferiority complex. And so by calling us The Big Guava, I think it's making fun

of the fact that obviously we're not New York and nor will we ever be, nor should we be.

Um, new York's great, but Tampa's Tampa. Tampa. But I think it also kind of something that, 'cause he loved this as his home. Um, so I think he thought it was also a very appropriate, because it does recognize the role of the guava in our kind of cultural history.

Dalia: Sure. What do you know about guava ween?

Rodney: Huh?

Well, so I, I have [00:14:00] experience with Guava Ween, 'cause I grew up here and so, um, guava wing's a really interesting, or was a really interesting, uh, Halloween party that was an Ybor city. It, uh, actually kind of grew out of something called the, um, artisan Writer's Ball. That had been an Ybor in the 1970s when, when Ybor was really this kind of bohemian, again, writers and artists enclave.

But by the, the late eighties, the, the bar culture that we all kind of know today had really started begin to taking hold. And so it was a, a social kind of party destination for a lot of people. Steve Otto actually was, I believe, played some role in the creation of Guava Ween. Um, but it was. Basically on the, I think the Saturday before Halloween every year, and it was, there was a big parade and they called it the Mama Guava Stumble.

And there was this woman who portrayed Mama Guava, uh, this kind of witch type character. And it was just a real fun party. And, and again, the innocent days of the late eighties and early nineties. It was, you know, Ybor was pretty [00:15:00] rough back then. Um, you, you, seventh Avenue was pretty much where everybody, everything was.

Uh, people of course lived all around, but, but as you know, a lot of visitors to Ybor didn't necessarily feel comfortable, you know, being on anything kind of south of sixth Avenue or north of eighth Avenue. And that's where everything was just jam packed in. But it also, I think, became a bit of a victim of his own success as things often are.

And I think there are. Was a desire to try and monetize it a bit more than, than probably was, was, was wise. And so at some point they fenced off the area for guava. You had to have a ticket to go in. And it became just a real big headache for a lot of people. And so then it just kind of ceased to exist, sadly enough.

You know, I never

Dalia: went.

Rodney: Yeah, it was, it was fun. I went, uh, for a couple years, um, I guess late high school, early college. Um, I come home for it. Um, but it was neat.

Dalia: Hmm. So what do you think the future holds for guava? You're a student of history. You've seen the arc of, you know, citrus rising and falling, and you know, strawberries still are going strong.

Where is guava [00:16:00] today? Well, I think.

Rodney: Guava, the future for guava is bright. I think, um, you know, particularly youth, when you consider the number of Latin Americans that are, that are coming into Florida, um, are coming into our, our country and they continue to want to bring pieces of home with them, sharing their culture, uh, which is, is what has been happening in our country for almost since the country began.

I think it must have just tasted darn good. I don't think it, you're gonna. Find a time when, when, you know, people just not gonna have, have guava. Now you mentioned this, you mentioned the citrus industry, which is really important. Uh, the, the guava industry is so small compared to the citrus industry, at least what it used to be in Florida.

I think I read a stat that the guava industry is, is like a \$12 million industry a year, which is a lot of money, but I think it's really just a handful of growers in South Florida mainly kind of centered around Miami who are. We're active in that. It's, I think, less than a thousand acres or something along those, those lines.

Maybe 2000 acres, maybe a [00:17:00] little bit more, but it's very small when you think about the scale of the Cirus industry in Florida. But because Florida had such a. Uh, so much land devoted citrus. When you have outbreaks of disease or infestation, it's very vulnerable. And so the greening that we've been experiencing in Florida for the past, gosh, by 10, 12 years now, has really devastated the industry.

Plus there's a lot of competition. Guava is, I think, in this nice little niche zone. Where one, there's not so many plants and they might be spread out a bit. So

one infestation isn't gonna wipe out the whole industry. There are kind of a lot of guava trees around. Plus there's so many in Central and South America.

The import business would still be very strong. I think it's less of a fad, although the matcha thing that you mentioned was kinda weird. Um, it's more of a. Of something that is just a part of the culture. So I think it's pretty stable.

Dalia: It's here to stay

Rodney: here to stay.

Dalia: Wow. Is there anything else we didn't talk about that's guava related that you wanna bring up?

Rodney: I don't think so. [00:18:00] I just, maybe another plug for that peanut butter and guava. You gotta try that.

Dalia: Hmm? You can wash it down with a guava matcha latte.

Rodney: Oh. Well, you know what, I don't know if you've had this, but guava ice cream

Dalia: stop.

Rodney: Publix carries guava ice creams made in Miami

Dalia: year round.

Rodney: Mm-hmm. Oh, yeah. It's, it's a, it's a Miami company by the guy you talk to.

Maybe makes, I don't know.

Dalia: Oh. But yeah, no, I, I did talk to, uh, Jorge Salva, who's one of the guava growers Yeah. In Miami, well,

Rodney: maybe he's shipping his guava to this ice cream factory down in Miami. You

Dalia: know what he, he sells, he sells it to, um, like chefs and businesses. Oh, okay.

Rodney: It's good. And so guava ice cream.

Run out and get it.

Dalia: Field trip. We can go right now. We're recording this at, I know, right? WSF And there's a Publix on campus. What? You didn't know. No. Across campus there's a

Rodney: Publix. I had no idea. Let, man, this place has changed since. Go. Let's go get

Dalia: some guava ice cream. Right? I know.

Rodney: Well then, and you mentioned guava pastry, guava cream cheese.

Get some guava paste. We can get some Cuban crackers and. Some cream cheese will do it upright.

Dalia: Okay. Let's do it.

Rodney: And cafe con leche as well. Mm.

Dalia: Always. I

Rodney: need caffeine.

Dalia: Yeah, you do. Thank you so [00:19:00] much. You're so good. Thank you. Oh, appreciate.

Rodney: I always love having you on. Thanks.

Dalia: That's historian Rodney Kite-Powell of the Tampa Bay History Center.

Better known, I think as. Everybody's Google for anything related to Tampa history, so he will actually be back later in the season to school us on another food related Tampa topic. In the meantime, make sure you are following The Zest on social media: Facebook, Instagram, at [@thezestpodcast](#) so you never miss an episode, A recipe, none of that.

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.