

The Zest S13E7

Carlton: [00:00:00] Truly, truly, truly, the product sells itself. All I do is make sure you get a sample and all the heavy lifting is done by this amazing product, not by me.

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.

This week, a crunchy treat that won't leave you running to the dentist. Eating peanut brittle is all fun and games until you chip a tooth, but you don't have to worry about that. With Psalms' Gourmet Brittle, it's a small batch confectionary started by matriarch Psalms Mack and her son Carlton Owens.

Psalms learned to bake brittle in home ec class and she later perfected her own version of the recipe. Hers is gluten-free, plant-based, and most importantly, light and airy. And you can take it from me because. I had to have some and it was amazing. No need to have your dentist on standby. So Psalms started out [00:01:00] baking the brittle as holiday gifts for family and friends, like a lot of people do, and with a nudge from Carlton.

She turned her hobby into a business today. The two run a brick and mortar location in South Pasadena. They also sell brittle at markets all across Tampa Bay and on their website with flavors like. Peanut cashew, mixed nut, almond chocolate and hot honey pecan. Did I try all of them? Uh, yeah I did. And you can even buy brittle infused popcorn, ice cream, spice rub, and coffee.

So, you know, we had to check this out. Alexandria Ebron and I visited the Psalms Brittle storefront, and in this conversation Psalms and Carlton recall how he talked her into starting the company.

They also offer advice for working with family and share why being a black-owned business feels especially sweet

Psalms: back in the day where young ladies would do home economics in middle [00:02:00] school, and I think some. Elementary school, uh, older girls were in home ec, so we learned how to bake. We learned how to cook a meal and deal with all types of, um, foods. So that's my earliest experience.

Dalia: And you made brittle as part of home ec class?

Psalms (2): We made everything from cookies to cakes to a full course, meals, cornbread, rice, broccoli. We, that used to be part of a program. Mm-hmm.

Dalia: I wish it still was. Okay. Carlton, what about you? Do you have an early memory of, of your mom's brittle or other places?

Carlton: Oh, yes, yes. I definitely have some memories. Well, one thing is that she always made cookies and brittle during the Christmas time.

One of my most earliest memories was being able to sit there and watch her cook it, and also being the one tasked to pack everything up. 'cause we had all of these. Family members and friends that she wanted to make sure [00:03:00] everyone received the gift that particular year. So one of the ways that she did it was making, you know, baked goods and um, you know, of course you had the cookies, but the brittle is what everybody started like really saying, wow, this is special.

Dalia: What do you think was special about it? I mean, I'll just start with the smell. I walked in here. And it just felt like a warm hug. The smell is incredible. It's that kind of caramel sweet smell. What was so special about the brittle as opposed to all your other baked goods, which I'm sure were amazing too.

Psalms: I guess it became special when people started asking for more after the holidays and birthdays and special occasions.

Carlton: You know, of course, having this in the house all the time during the holiday season, you became, you kind of become accustomed to having it so. I didn't know, believe it or not, I didn't know.

Brittle was hard, tough, and chewy. Until I actually went off to college and, and was homesick and I wanted some of my mama's [00:04:00] brittle, I, I, I couldn't get it. I ended up going into a store to get some and realized very quickly that my mama's brittle is not this brittle that's in the store. The brittle that's in the store is tough, chewy, sticky, wrecks your teeth, her brittle, gentle on your dental.

But I didn't know that at the time, so I actually thought something was wrong with the store-Bought, brittle. I actually called the manager out, made a little bit of a scene, say, Hey, this stuff is, is is spoiled goods or is, is has to be expired? He said, no, this is brittle. And I said, well, not mama's brittle.

She really does have something very special.

Dalia: Yeah. When I think peanut brittle, I think. Dental emergency, it's going to crack your tooth. It's going to be delicious, but it's gonna, it's gonna be very hard on your teeth. So Psalms, what is different about your ingredients or your process? How is it, as he said, gentle on your dental?

Psalms: Well, it's dairy and gluten-free. It's all plant-based.

Dalia: Okay. We need to back up because I don't even understand the, the process of like [00:05:00] typical brittle. So, typical brittle has what in it? Butter.

Psalms: Uh, it has butter. Some people have milk and other hardening types of ingredients. Our ingredients has no animal byproducts.

We use plant butter in our product and everything is gluten free. Are you plant-based? Am I what?

Dalia: Are you plant-based? Are you a vegetarian or a vegan?

Psalms: Well, I'm, what are the, uh, pescatarian?

Dalia: Okay.

Psalms: Yeah.

Dalia: Im just curious, why did you decide to leave out some of those animal products?

Psalms: Well, it was a, it was a process of you, you know, you have to go through a process of elimination to find out what is working the best.

So you do start out with butter and all the other traditional ingredients, but it doesn't work. And so you begin to eliminate those and you figure out what's working. And when plant butter came on the scene, that's what worked with other things [00:06:00] that I, that you know, excluded from the ingredients.

Dalia: Okay. So what are some of the ingredients without giving away all your secrets?

Psalms: Well, it's basically the same sugar plant, butter, flavoring, those type salts ingredients.

Carlton: But there is one secret ingredient. It is mama's love.

Dalia: I was gonna say, I knew it had to

Carlton: be love. It's mama's love. It's what makes it so light. I mean, the fact that it is plant-based is a plus. You know, it's gluten free is a plus.

But really, truly what makes it fluffy and light is the, the attention to detail, the love. The soul that she puts into every batch and, and everything's made small batch. It's not like the commercial brittle makers where you have these huge batches of, uh, big bowls and things that they throw on. No, this is really handmade, hand poured and hand loved by mama.

Dalia: Okay, so how do you get from making brittle as gifts for family and friends over the holidays to now having a [00:07:00] storefront? On Pasadena. We're on Pasadena Avenue in South St. Pete, I should say. So people, you might hear traffic going by, we're right here in the community. How does that leap happen?

Well, Carlton would have to tell

Psalms: you about that leap because he's the one that pushed me over.

Dalia: He pushed you over the

Psalms: edge and told me and say, jump. Here you go.

Carlton: Well, well, you know, it's, it is funny that we are doing a podcast because, um, back in 2000, I would say nine. Team or, so I was a huge avid listener of podcast and there was a gentleman, I forget his name, but he was talking about how to create business ideas and he said sometimes the best business idea is uh, something that comes easy to you and hard to others.

Right? I think you may have heard that phrase. So mom was in the midst of getting ready for retirement and she was contemplating what she would be doing in retirement, like to keep her busy. So we had a couple of options and I said, you know what, mama? [00:08:00] I think you should start making brittle. And I think people were actually.

Actually buy it. And she said, I don't know, uh, maybe, you know, I've been giving this stuff away every year. I mean, who's going to buy this stuff? Right? And so it was around March, so all the Christmas, um, cheers. Kind of worn off

by that time, right? It said March. And I'd say, mommy, please just start making samples.

Let me just get it out there and, and see if, if, uh, folks would, you know, respond to it. So she went in there, started making some samples. At the time we just had one flavored peanut brittle, and on the weekends I would go to barbershops and hair salons and just give out samples.

Dalia: Oh, I love that. That is so classic.

'cause every time you're at the, if it's a black barbershop Yes. Black hair salon, somebody is, somebody is gonna come through

Carlton: uhhuh with

Dalia: something with a peach cobbler. With, with something, yes. That you were not expecting.

Carlton: So, um, started giving out samples and that phone started to ring. And it hasn't stopped.

And that was literally, um, over six years ago now. We [00:09:00] then going through that process, we said, well, you know, you know, we got some momentum here. Let's, let's, let's see what else we can do. So we decided to what? Go to the mall.

Psalms: What mall? Tyrone Mall. Tyrone Mall. Mm-hmm. And Carlton was again, encouraging me to give it a try in the mall.

And, you know, we'll make a decision whether we go with a business or not, based on. The response of the public.

Dalia: So you had a, a stand at the mall?

Psalms: Yeah, kiosk.

Dalia: Kiosk.

Psalms: The first weekend sold completely out. And I go, oh, no, no. It was the first day. I sew completely out. So I had to go home after closing the mall at

nine o'clock and bake until the wee hours of the morning to get ready for the next day.

Dalia: Oh my gosh.

Psalms: That happened every weekend.

Dalia: Okay, so Carlton, as she's talking, you are nodding and smiling like I told you so I told you this was a great idea.[00:10:00]

All right. We gotta talk about the flavors. What am I smelling? Talk me through. All the things.

Carlton: Now, when you talk about flavors, of course you know about peanut brittle. When you taste mama's peanut brittle, it is like taking you back in time. It is the most nostalgic, the most sentimental experience you'll have with any dessert candy.

Now, um, after she developed, or perfected, I should say, the peanut, we went into a flavor called pecan. The pecan, brittle, we've nicknamed life changing. It [00:11:00] is an experience of a lifetime. It is the flavor that's going to go great with your coffee, ice cream, cakes, puddings, and pies. Then once mama finished with pecans, she decided she wanted to, you know, venture into some more flavors.

We decided to do, uh, mixed nut brittle because we knew people like a little bit of everything. So we have, uh, hazelnuts, cashews, almonds, peanuts, and pecans all in one bite. Uh, we call it bougie. Brittle. It is so fancy. It's so luxurious. It go. It's gonna go great in your coffee and ice cream as well. Now, moving on for our chocolate lovers.

I think chocolate was the next one. Moving on to the chocolate lovers, we have a flavor called three levels of deliciousness, almond Chocolate, coconut, brittle. It was. Designed and conceived for ice cream and coffee. My mom is an avid coffee drinker, so that was forefront in the flavoring, um, in terms of what we wanted to pair it with.

Last but not least, well, not the last, but not least, but our core five flavors. The last one is [00:12:00] called Cloud Cashew Brittle. It's arguably the lightest, brittle maal makes. It is so light that you think you're eating a cloud or living on one. It just breaks down just like cotton candy as you chew into it.

Can you imagine having brittle that is like cotton candy literally melts in your mouth. So those are our core five flavors. And then we, you know, we jump around with other specialty flavors, like our hot peanut brittle, our hot and spicy peanut, uh, hot and spicy barbecue pecan. Brittle. We also do flavors like, uh, chocolate cashew.

Um, and of course we ventured out into other products too, like brittle popcorn and brittle ice cream, which, um, the brittle also pairs well. But did I miss anything, mama?

Dalia: No, you covered it all. Oh, I am so hungry right now. You are a salesman.

Carlton: Oh, well, well, listen, I, I tell people all the time, I thank you for being so flattering, but truly, [00:13:00] truly, truly, the product sells itself.

All I do is make sure you get a sample and all the heavy lifting is done by this amazing product, not by me.

Dalia: Oh my gosh. Okay. I mean, it does sell itself. As soon as I walked in here, I did feel like I was floating on a cloud, but what have been some of the biggest challenges?

Psalms: I can't think of any serious challenges other than maybe, uh, lagging, getting my ingredients.

'cause I. Some are shipped in, like my pecans come from Alabama, Summerland farm. Oh, I keep calling it Alabama. It's Georgia. Georgia, yes. And there have been times when I put in an order and she said, we don't have it. I we, what do you mean you don't have it? I have that. Have it. And so that, that is not really a serious challenge because they found a way to get my pecans to me.

Other than that. Ev, everything has been hunky dory with me on this end. Mm-hmm.

Carlton: Well. Sometimes in business, you know, you're, you're to have a problem. Problem of always [00:14:00] selling out is a good problem to have. So we're blessed that we cannot keep product on the shelves. Uh, here are as well as the other markets and places that we ven.

The other challenge has probably just been the pricing. I mean, things, cost of goods are constantly going up, so we're always battling. Trying to not raise

prices so much, you know, we we're still blessed and we find ways to still create an affordable option for anyone who loves brittle. So, uh, people who haven't tried it yet, we, we find ways to give free samples.

We ship out free samples to people who want try. So it's, it is, it's our way of being able to give someone a little bit of sunshine in a bag made by mama. Okay.

Dalia: What about the dynamic of being a mother and son working together? You seem to be, you know, like a, like a hand in a glove, I guess is the saying.

What advice do you have for [00:15:00] families in business together?

Psalms: Well, I, I, um, I pretty much follow my son's vision, you know, I do what he tells me to do, basically. Uh, every now and then I'll have a little pushback. I said, wait a minute. Hold on. And then when I think about what he's proposing, I said, well, let's, let's try it.

So I've kinda learned to listen to what he's recommending or suggesting and be open minded to what he wants to, uh, express in his vision or what he sees in the future. And the other thing I would say, working. Closer together is each of us have to have our space. I'm responsible for certain things, he's responsible for certain things, so we try not to cross over into the other person's lane.

And that keeps everything, uh, pretty much [00:16:00] balance and friendly and loving, you know, 'cause we are family.

Carlton: Oh, and make no mistake about it, she still is the boss. So me being the son, it is, it is. It is always a pleasure being able to work with mom when I was younger and. Spent so much time away from home, I would dream of the days where I could spend more time with my mother.

Didn't know that God would make that dream come true in this way. Being able to see her every day and also be around and, and create and, and add value to the community with this product, which I truly believe is, um, not only a. A huge blessing to our family, but it's also a way to be able to bless other families.

And so being able to be family forward, family based, and doing everything in lockstep with Mama is a dream come true.

Dalia: Oh, that's beautiful. [00:17:00] Where do you see this going in the future?

Psalms: I see it going to my 11-year-old granddaughter. Is that your daughter?

Carlton: Yes.

Psalms: She comes in and she works on the weekends with me, so I'm getting her prepared.

So I tell all the time when I move on to glory up there with Jesus in heaven. This is something you'll have that grandma left for you. I guess my main dream of where it goes is a legacy for my son and his kids.

Dalia: I love that so much. And what does it mean to you specifically as a black-owned business? A lot of people talk about the importance of ownership, and now you've built something that you are working with your son and can pass down to your granddaughter.

So does that just make it, excuse the pun, does it make it even sweeter?

Psalms: Yes, it does. Especially when I have her in here with me and I'm telling her why she's doing what she's doing and the importance of, you know. Picking up her speed and productivity and so forth, and the looks that I [00:18:00] get, and I say, well, don't look at me like that.

'cause one day you gonna be looking at somebody like that and it's not gonna be so nice, you know? But yeah, it makes it even sweeter.

Carlton: Yeah. Just, just, just to add to that, I just think it's just it's, it's just another example. Anything's possible and there's no reason to set any limitations on yourself just because you think that, you know, you may be in a not so good situation.

You know, if you just put one step in front of the other, trust in God, have faith, build the family unit to be strong is nothing you can't do.

Dalia: Beautiful. All right, last question. This is just me being curious. Why is purple your color? You've got, uh, Carlton, you're wearing the purple shirt with the logo on it and, and it seems like purple is the theme color of Psalms brittle?

Psalms: Yes, it is. Because if you know anything about the Bible, and Proverbs 31, the woman's name is Lydia, and [00:19:00] Lydia was a working woman, and one of the colors they talk about Lydia. Kinda dealt with or would work

with was purple. And I think, well, hey, I'm still, I'm a working woman. I'm still working. I'm not mo, I'm not really sitting down in retirement and purple.

I don't even think we considered another color, did we?

Dalia: Wow.

Psalms: Yeah.

Dalia: Is there anything else you guys wanna mention about the brittle.

Psalms: I can't think of anything. I'm just honored that you would come out today and spend time talking to us about what we do, why we are here, and just, just give us a chance to just really reflect.

This is a reflective moment for me. I mean, I really thinking about the, the questions and my response and Carlton's response. I just think it's special that you would do this for us and I'm grateful. Oh, I'm grateful for you too.

Carlton: Yes, we're, we're very grateful. And for all the listeners out there, um, [00:20:00] as you were probably hearing us talk about the flavors, and you may be suffering from brittle withdrawal.

You know, you can always go to our website, psalms brittle.com and request a free sample. There's a link on the page. Grab your free sample, just pay a little bit for shipping, but you can get a free sample. We'll send it out to you just in case you think we are telling you something that may not be so true.

But once you try the product, you will see for yourself it is gentle on your dental. And sentimental to your soul.

Dalia: Mic drop. Amazing.

You guys are so much fun.

That's Psalms Mack and Carlton Owens of Psalms' Gourmet Brittle in South Pasadena. I know you're hungry. I know this conversation made you hungry. It made us hungry too. So after I was done speaking with Psalms and Carlton, they arranged a little taste test. For me and my colleague, Alexandria [00:21:00] Ebron, and there was not a flavor I didn't like, and I'm not a huge, usually not a huge peanut frontal person, but my absolute favorite was the pecan.

It was just incredible. It is light, it is crispy. It is. Sweet. It is everything they said, it is absolutely fabulous. So you gotta, you gotta get some of your own right. So you can head to our website or the show notes of this episode for a link to Psalms Brittle where you can get a sample for yourself.

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.