

The Zest S12E11

Julia: [00:00:00] When you're in the studio and you're in the kitchen, you don't see, it's not like a restaurant. You can't look through the window of the kitchen door and see the reaction of people eating your food. So this is our way of actually seeing how we have an impact on, on people across the US and how we're actually helping teach people this valuable life skill of how to cook.

Dalia: I am 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, America's Test Kitchen is coming to Florida.

Today we're catching up with the co-hosts of America's Test Kitchen. That's the PBS Cooking Show that teaches us which cooking equipment and recipes are worth our time and money. Love that for us. Now, two years ago, ATK Co-hosts Bridget Lancaster and Julia Collin Davison came to Tampa Bay for something they'd never really done before.

A live onstage event full of cooking [00:01:00] tips, stories from the show and audience participation. The evening was so much fun and I was there so I can vouch for this. It was so much fun that the ladies now have hit the road again with live events in more than a dozen cities across the country. So you could say that Florida was the test kitchen for America's. Test Kitchen on November 5th. You can join them at the Palladium Theater at St. Petersburg College for Inside the Kitchen Live with Julia and Bridget. It's an event presented by W-E-V-U-P-B-S. Now this show features new material and I'm calling it material because did I mention how funny these ladies are?

So if you attended their palladium event two years ago, then you will definitely wanna come see what they have up their sleeves. This. Time your event ticket includes a cookbook and some other perks. There will also be an audience q and a and did I mention I'm hosting the event, so I would love to meet you.

It would just be a win-win, win all the way around. So [00:02:00] check out the show notes of this episode or head to our website, thezestpodcast.com to get your tickets ahead of the live event. I chatted with Bridget and Julia in this conversation. They offer their thoughts on the state of public media. They share the kitchen tools worth upgrading.

I definitely need to make some purchases now. And they reveal the guilty pleasure foods they love to buy from gas stations. So here's my conversation with Bridget Lancaster and Julia Collin Davison.

It is so good to see both of you again. You're always so much fun. I'm so excited that you two are coming back. It's really cool because you started, you sort of kicked off this, uh, germ of an idea to have a tour in Tampa Bay. Can we, can we take credit for that? Can that be our claim to fame?

Bridget: Tampa Bay is the home to the kickoff of the America's Test Kitchen tour live.

Absolutely.

Dalia: I love it. Okay. Last time you were here, you were on stage, you had us [00:03:00] flipping jelly beans in a saute pan. We laughed. We learned what can we expect this time around? Some

Julia: similar things. We're gonna bring people up on stage, but they're gonna do new things. We're not gonna have them flip jelly beans.

Uh, we're gonna have a tong obstacle course, so we're gonna give people different types of tongs, some winning tongs, some losing tongs. They're gonna have to pick up toothpicks and ramekins full of water. Then open, um, a bottle of soda using the tongs, which is just fun. 'cause sometimes you think you're a bad cook, but it's not you, it's your equipment.

And that's a big part of what we do. We test kitchen equipment to tell you what's worth the money and what isn't. So we're gonna kind of play that up a little bit live.

Dalia: Ooh, that's so fun. Okay, Bridget, say more about that. Because a lot of us are looking for deals. Maybe we found something at a big box store, a dollar store, maybe it was a hand me down.

Here's the trap I fall into. I have a lot of hand me down items and it's hard to justify spending money to replace them. So what are some of [00:04:00] those items like tongs, I wouldn't have thought of, but they are something that I use almost every day. So it probably is worth spending a little more to get the ones you really love.

Bridget: I feel like you don't know that something is really bad until you come across something that was designed to be good. And that's exactly what we do in the test kitchen. So you might have that pair of tongs like Julia said, that you've, you've got your kitchen, you've inherited it, right? So, and you, you've got it.

And it's not until you use it for more than just flipping over a pork chop and a skillet that you realize, oh, I can get a lot more outta this. Um, but yeah, I think tongues, knives. Knife sharpeners is the thing that people don't think of enough when they think of knives. They should just go together like peanut butter and jelly.

Absolutely, because a, a great knife is only as good as as many times as you sharpen it. I do wanna add that we have another thing too called name that smell, which might be a little mysterious about, um, but it does involve blindfolds and smelling things.

I made up a, I [00:05:00] made up a game for my stepdaughter and nephew when they were little called name that smell, and I just, it was one of those, oh my gosh, we're so bored.

I'm gonna put stuff in cups, and they asked to play it over and over again. That is so fun. Thanks. Okay. I'm loving this. All right. Julia, what are some of those other items that you think are worth investing in? I'm thinking the holidays are coming up. I never know what to ask for, but if somebody asked me what I wanted, I could say, Hey, I want a new pair of tongs.

Julia: You want a really good cutting board. Um, I think it is the often overlooked, you do inherit cutting boards. They're either warped or stained. Uh, the cutting board I have, it stays on the counter all the time. It does not get put away. It is big. Uh, our winning one, which I'll say right now, is made by Teak House.

Which is a company I really like. They use scrap pieces of teak from their teak farm so that it's less waste. They were really careful about the glue to be, uh, food safe. And I don't baby this thing at all. [00:06:00] I beat the heck outta this sucker, and it has withstood me for over a decade. And it's nice and big, and I hate small cutting boards because you don't, you're, you wind up having like some prepped food and some raw food, and you're working in this little area.

Give yourself some space, and if you have a nice prep area and a good cutting board, suddenly everything's just easier. Making dinner's just easier. You have room to spread out.

Dalia: I love that because somebody listening never makes dinner. They store shoes in their oven. They order a takeout every night. But it's those little, little bits of friction that add up to make us not want to do something.

Mm-hmm. And then on the other end, we have people listening who could probably be your co-hosts. Okay. So we have a spectrum. Bridget, do you have any advice for. Entertaining. It's like even saying the word entertaining like fills me with anxiety. I'm, I'm actually having my book club over in a couple weeks.

[00:07:00] Like, like, help me, help me, help me. Calm down.

Bridget: Okay. Well first of all is your recipe selection. You wanna choose some recipes that can be made in advance, so use that refrigerator, use that freezer to your advantage as much as you can. So everything like maybe sausage stuffed mushrooms. Those can be put into the freezer and you just bake 'em off at the last second.

So as much of the labor as you can get ahead of the game, and if you're having people over for a meal, especially going into the fall season, the winter season, I always tell people, take a look at bras and stews and those long, slow cooked things that not only means that you don't have to spend all the time in the kitchen because it basically takes care of itself, but you can make it a day in advance and it tastes even better.

Dalia: Ooh, that's good.

Bridget: You wanna be out there having a glass of wine with your friends?

Dalia: I sure do. Mm-hmm. Okay. I, um, am planning to make chili, so I feel good about that choice.

Julia: Yes. Perfect. Okay, perfect. Chili

Dalia: and cornbread Done. Yes. Yes, absolutely. Done. I, I might [00:08:00] even make some tonight. Just have it in the freezer.

Okay. So, so chili is one of my, um, like old faithful. I know it's gonna turn out, I know everybody's gonna like it. It's vegan, but the meat eaters don't have to

know that. So everybody can get on board with it. But then Julia, how do you two come up with new ideas? I mean, you've been doing this show for a while.

You've got the magazine, you've got this. Cookbook that we have to talk about. It's a great cookbook. Okay. I have written a cookbook as well. Not anything on your level, but just coming up with like a hundred recipes felt like a heavy lift. And then I go back to, you know, what should we have for dinner tonight after soccer practice?

So how do you generate new ideas and keep the creativity flowing?

Julia: Yeah. Well, there's two things. First is, we are constantly asking our readers and viewers what are they interested in, because. Our magazines don't have any advertising. We're on PBS. Um, our app doesn't have any advertising and so we really wanna make sure our content delivers.

So we are [00:09:00] constantly asking people, what are you into Mediterranean cooking for two air fryer, food as medicine, so the anti-inflammatory. And we take that advice so we know that what we're gonna cook really relates to the audience. But also if you think about it, everything's different nowadays.

Supermarkets are not the same as they were 10, much less 20 years ago. Cooking methods, you have air fryers, Instapot, Sovi, everything's changing all the time. And if you add in what. We call the global pantry, which is you can get any ingredient to your front door within a couple days. Suddenly the world of cooking has opened up and the world of options, and that's just really fun.

There's just, there's almost too many options. And so between asking our readers what they're interested in and taking a look at all the new things available that, you know, it's pretty easy. Wow.

Dalia: Okay. So what's something that maybe is entering the zeitgeist that hasn't reached me yet? Oh

Julia: yeah, we were talking [00:10:00] about it today.

The Japanese, there was a Japanese chicken and the Bridget, 'cause we're making lineups for our TV show for next year. And that was really interesting. We were almost gonna do a whole show on this one ingredient that we could, Koji Koji. Yeah. That. You might find in the supermarket, you could definitely order, and it's really interesting.

You should put it in your pantry and play with it. What is Koji, Bridget? Oh,

Bridget: oh, you're you're, you're putting this one on me. Well, it is, so it's, it's basically, it's a mold. And it's responsible for the flavor, the deep savory flavor of soy sauce. Um, uh, fermented bean paste is made with it, MISO's, made with it.

Uh, saki, you use all, all of you use Koji. And what's great about it's, it adds this aged super deep savory flavor with very little effort. So it's kind of one of those magic ingredients that you can keep and you can add to things and it doesn't take over. It doesn't make it taste like that and saying it's a [00:11:00] mold, you know, so is blue cheese.

You know, and it's deep and savory and delicious, fermented and all the words. It's fermented. Yeah. So it's, it's, uh, yeah, it's a fermented product. It adds just such a deep rounded flavor to so many foods. We've got a fried chicken that's unbelievable, that uses it to give it a, almost a steaky meaty flavor, and it's just gorgeous.

Yeah. It's, it's a super umami ingredient.

Dalia: It's fun to have something in your pantry or your fridge, because then you try to think of like, what else can I do with it? So that's always fun. Yes, definitely.

Julia: It's the kind of ingredient which just makes everything taste a little more, like, a little more meaty, a little more chickeny, a little more hearty, like whatever you're cooking, it just adds to it, uh, without being a star or taking the, you know, distracting from other flavors.

And so you find yourself putting it in everything, putting it in salad dressings, putting it in a marinade, you know, it just goes everywhere. I heard one time somebody,

Bridget: uh, described it as if a mushroom was a superhero, it would be that. 'cause it's that just intensely savory [00:12:00] flavor.

Julia: Ooh, I wanna try that. And this is the benefit of our app, I have to say.

You could go to our app and you could type in Koji and you could see all the recipes that use it. And then if you scroll down underneath the recipes, you see other people commenting on how it worked for them and other things they're

using it with. It's like a whole community on the app of people talking about ingredients once you get into the recipes.

So that's fun too.

Dalia: That's very fun. And Julia, I did wanna ask you, how has social media changed the way you all do your job? So there's one answer right there.

Julia: Yeah. Well, um, instead of really focusing on the magazines that published every other month, we're now focused on publishing daily. Um, and this really shows up on our website.

In our app we have about one to two, usually two re new recipes a day that land on the app. And then. Throughout the week, we have different daily drops. For example, on Wednesdays you'll always get a brand new equipment testing. Uh, so our, our equipment testing team, you know, will, [00:13:00] will kind of drop new knowledge and they'll do the same for tastings and there's new things every day.

And that definitely changes how we, how we operate. It's no longer a magazine model. It really is a daily publishing model. Yeah.

Dalia: And people can give you feedback. It's no longer a one way street.

Julia: That's amazing.

Dalia: That's the best part.

Julia: Yeah. 'cause our, our readers and viewers are really vocal, and I love that.

They want good information and it has to be accurate. And when it is, they can't wait to share it. And if something doesn't work, they don't hesitate to tell us. And we take that very seriously if a recipe doesn't work. The test cook who developed that recipe will get on the app, answer questions, take that recipe back into the kitchen to see what didn't translate.

So it really is like a, a connection, a um, a connection to the test kitchen that's in real life, you know, in real time. Very cool.[00:14:00]

Dalia: Okay, Bridget, we've, we've mentioned the cookbook. I would have to do some stretches before I even attempted to pick it up. It is right over a thousand pages, right?

Bridget: It's 14, almost 1400 recipes. Just the recipes alone. So it's from all 26 seasons.

Dalia: Incredible. Okay. There's actually a tofu recipe that I wanted to try, and I'm like, oh, this book can also be the tofu press.

So this is a bonus. How do you think about cookbooks today? I mean, Julia was just talking about the app and how people wanna interact with these recipes. Is there still a place for cookbooks today? I think

Bridget: so. I definitely think so. I love a good cookbook and I [00:15:00] do wear it as a badge of honor if my cookbooks have food on the pages and they maybe stick together a little bit.

That is a well loved cookbook because there really is something about flipping between the pages, maybe making notes. You got a little post-it note that you put in there. I think there will always be a place for cookbooks. Having said that, I mean the app does allow for more back and forth conversation between us.

It's a little bit more dynamic, but there's something so beautiful about having a cookbook. It still is to me, one of the best gifts that you can give somebody, especially me.

Dalia: Julia, what about

Julia: you? Oh, yeah. There's nothing to be sort of the tangible feeling of holding all these recipe ideas and I mean, I know I have 'em by my bedside.

It is a lovely way to kind of just kind of think about food and think about flavors and read about methods. It's a way to relax for sure. So, I mean, it's useful in the kitchen, but also it's just a lovely read.

Dalia: It is. It's, it's entertaining and it's almost like a, a snapshot in time. You know, [00:16:00] if you read a cookbook from a hundred years ago or from a different region, they're totally different.

Okay. We gotta talk about PBS. We're an NPR podcast. You know, you guys are a PBS show. What's the, uh, what's the mood at work?

Bridget: Well that's, that's a great question. But honestly, I think the way that we fund our shows, we are self-funded. You know, we're gonna keep on going on PBS as long as PBS will have us, because we still think that we're the, a really good match with our educational approach to cooking.

It's fun, it's entertaining, but at the end of it, you really want your viewers to take away, uh, you know, at least one piece of useful information with every show. So I think in our particular situation. You know, it's challenging, but, um, it's a challenge that we think that we are able to overcome, and that's part of the reason that we're going around to all these stations and having these events, really, is to remind people of the value of PBS bring together all these [00:17:00] fans of the show in one room and it's, you know, hopefully we can raise money for the stations, we can raise money for the area.

Yeah. It's just part of the beauty of being in the P-B-S-N-P-R family. Right.

Dalia: Absolutely. Well, we're so glad you're in the family. You're like my third cousins or something.

Bridget: I'll take it.

Dalia: Okay.

Bridget: Sounds awesome.

Dalia: Okay, so with that, Julia, what do you love about this work? I mean, you've been doing this for a while.

You said you read cookbooks to relax, which I'm thinking I would be maybe stressed out, like, like having to come up with recipes in my dreams. So what brings you joy? What brings you joy about sharing? Your love of cooking with America?

Julia: Yeah. Well, first of all, I love to eat and I love to cook, so it's a natural progression of that and I'm, I've always loved to eat and cook since I was a little kid, so that's just a love of mine.

But when we're on the road, what the best part or the people that come up and said, you help me, you help me. You changed my life. [00:18:00] I met my wife

because we bonded over ATK. I'm teaching my kids to cook and it happens. Over and over. And you know, when you're in the studio and you're in the kitchen, you don't see, it's not like a restaurant.

You can't look through the window of the kitchen door and see the reaction of people eating your food. So this is our way of actually seeing how we have an impact on, on people across the US and how we're actually helping teach people this valuable life skill of how to cook. And people take it different ways, you know, like some people really like the science, some people really like this.

Story. Some people just really wanna learn how to cook so they can cook every day. So it hits all different types of people. And I love hearing all this. I love hearing all of

Dalia: it. That's a great way of putting it. And Bridget, what about you? What do you still love about this work?

Bridget: I still love, beyond what Julia said, I still love that I get to work with a really dynamic group of individuals from various backgrounds and various culinary backgrounds.

So I'm always learning. I mean, I am the old dog that is learning new tricks [00:19:00] every day. So what's what's great about I once upon a time, I wasn't the old dog, but now I'm, and what's great is you think that you've learned, you've seen it all, and then here comes someone brand new and just shakes the box and we're all figuring it out together.

And. It's great and we actually applaud that in within our halls of America's test kitchen. We really love people, uh, not assuming the status quo when it comes to food. You gotta test it, you gotta make sure it still works, and we're always discovering new things. Definitely.

Dalia: Mm. I love that. Okay. I mean, of the 1400 recipes, it's like choosing a favorite child, a favorite third cousin.

Do you have a recipe to recommend for somebody who maybe is intimidated to get into the kitchen, something that you know is like a slam dunk so that they can have a success on their record sheet and build on that? I see you, I see the wheels turning for both of you.

Julia: Yes. I always say the same thing, and I, [00:20:00] I will bore you to death with this recipe.

I won't do it today, but if you ever, it's roast chicken. I love roast chicken. I think it is a pillar of basic home cooking, and we have a lot of different options for roast chicken, but the one that I love is you butterfly, the chicken, and now you can buy them butterflied or spatchcocked. And you brown it in a skillet on top of the stove.

You brown the skin and then you take the chicken out, you put potatoes in the pan, and then you put the chicken brown side up and then you put the whole thing in the oven. So you get these schmaltzy roasted potatoes and this beautiful, uh, roast chicken and you feel like you've won the lottery. When you eat this thing, I mean, it is just perfection.

You have most of a meal. You add a quick vegetable, you know, something green, and you're good to go. It's beautiful. It tastes good. And you learn a lot about how to cook a chicken through this very simple method. I could go on for hours about roast chicken. I have actually, um, you ever wanna talk about roast chicken?

I'm your girl.

Dalia: That's a [00:21:00] great one because she's one 800 roast chicken. Roast chicken. Yeah. Yeah. Call that number. No, but that's a great one because it's so versatile. It could be tacos one night. It could be I pasta. It could be a million different things. Bridget, do you co-sign on the roast chicken or do you have a different favorite?

Bridget: Of course,

I love roast chicken. Um, uh, probably not to the heights, depths and breadths that Julia does, but I'm there with, or I will take it anytime. Um, I think one of the things that I love about our cookbook and I was. I was actually going through it and just remembering some of the, uh, early recipes.

But we have a pasta soup, which is fantastic. And what I love about it's, it teaches a little bit of knife skills for the, the new cook. It teaches a little bit about some secret ingredients that you might add in there to add, uh, depth to the soup. And at the end it is. It's bulletproof. It's just fantastic.

And you've got this rich, beautiful, colorful, vibrant soup that was easy to make but didn't look like it was easy to make.

Julia: Mm. I'm so glad you brought that up, Bridget. I'm [00:22:00] gonna make that this weekend. Hey, you have to make it too winner.

Dalia: It's so comforting. Yes. The best every time. Okay, on the other end.

Last question. Make us all feel better. Is there a lowbrow food that you enjoy? I mean, you've been traveling the country, I bet you've been in some gas stations. What's your sort of guilty pleasure?

Julia: Mine is Pringles. I love Pringles. It is a terrible potato chip, right? It's not crisp. It's all fake. The shape is weird.

I could eat a whole canister if I'm really hungry and I love all the flavors. This is not a flavor I won't eat. You and my 9-year-old son have something in common.

Dalia: Bridget, what about you?

Bridget: Um, well, there's a couple, uh, you mentioned gas stations and I actually wouldn't call this, uh, quote unquote lowbrow, but I love good pepperoni roll.

I grew up in West Virginia and the pepperoni rolls there are out of this world, the ones that you just stop at a gas station. And I there the best, but also, um, I, I love bologna. I love bologna. I know. Can't help it. [00:23:00] It's just a flat hot dog. It's

Julia: flat hot dog. You're not wrong.

Bridget: What you do

Julia: with the bologna, Bridget?

Bridget: Like up sandwich? Well, if I get thick, I, I get a piece of bologna and I cut it thick and I then I'll fry it for sandwiches just like my grandma used to do. And it's just gorgeous. And it's like, it, you know, we can make it expensive and call it more Ella if you'd like, but you know. It is a, uh, a refined sausage.

That's how I like to put it. Wow. Which is called bologna.

Dalia: Wow. Oh my gosh. This is fantastic. You two are so much fun. I wanna go on a road trip with the two of you and drive through West Virginia and, and

get all these yummy treats. And there's great food at gas stations too, so no shade to gas stations.

Yeah. Is there anything else you want people to know about, uh, the event coming up in St. Pete? It's gonna be a ton

Bridget: of fun. Get ready to come up on stage if, if you think you're up for the dare. It's a different show than what we put on last time that we were in, uh, Tampa. Um, and yeah, we just hope people come [00:24:00] along for the ride and really enjoy themselves.

Julia: Yeah. And when you're there, pay attention to what we say. 'cause we have a lot of giveaway at the end. Lots of giveaway presents, uh, but you have to answer a question to win it, and the questions are based on what we've said earlier in the day, on the stage. So, yeah.

Bridget: Wow. Okay. Lot of giveaway. It's the same method that I used to get my kids to pay attention to me.

I say at the end of this conversation there's gonna be a giveaway.

Dalia: There's gonna be a bologna a I'm throwing bologna into the crowd.

Bridget: They might be flying bologna. You can never know.

Dalia: Flying bologna. Oh my gosh. You two are a, that'd be a great gas station name by the way. But you two are a blast. I cannot wait to see you.

I hope you listening will join us 'cause it's gonna be such a fun time. Thank you so much for your time today. It's so nice to see you. Always great to talk to you. Thank you. Bridget Lancaster and Julia Collin Davison are the co-hosts of America's Test Kitchen on PBS. You can find a link to buy tickets for the November 5th live event in the show notes of this [00:25:00] episode or at thezestpodcast.com.

That's also where you'll find the roast chicken recipe that Julia can't stop gushing about along with one of Bridget's. Faves Pasta. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF, copyright 2025, part of the NPR network.