

The Zest S13E12

Dalia: [00:00:00] Do you have a comfort food that kind of brings you back to that feeling of home and meaning?

Alton: Yeah. Martinis.

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. Guess what? Alton Brown is coming to town. I did not mean for that to rhyme, I swear.

You know Alton Brown from Food Network shows like Good Eats, Iron Chef America and Cutthroat Kitchen. Maybe you subscribe to his YouTube series, Alton Brown Cooks Food. Perhaps you've even caught one of his live shows full of the scientific demonstrations and trademark humor that accompany Brown's unique approach to food.

But Brown says there's still more to talk about. For instance, I had been mispronouncing his name. It is actually Alton, not ALL-ton.. My bad. I know a thing or two about [00:01:00] having your name mispronounced. So after performing live in more than 300 cities for upwards of half a million fans, Alton is embarking on a tour of more intimate events for what he's calling "An Evening with Alton Brown." This includes a stop at Ruth Eckerd Hall in Clearwater on April 25th. How lucky are we in Tampa Bay? Ahead of his visit, I caught up with Alton Brown.

Alton: Well, the last time that I blazed through the state, which was a spring of last year, I brought a very large, um, kind of spectacular. Um, thing, uh, lots, lots of big show biz. And what I realized later in the year when I got done with that tour is that I, I kind of missed out on, on being able to do some kind of smaller, more intimate shows or what I, what I refer to as kind of unplugged club dates.

Um, and so I decided that I would do another. Tour, they would be more about playing smaller towns and smaller theaters so that I could [00:02:00] interact with smaller audiences. So this is more a show about storytelling, uh, more a show about conversation, although there are still two rather large, unusual culinary, uh, demonstrations that, uh, that we'll be pulling out.

Dalia: Ooh, that's a good tease. Are there any foods you're excited to try? I know you kind of hated on the Cuban sandwich last time you were here, but I heard they

Alton: were I did not hate, no, I didn't hate on, I, I will eat any Cuban sandwich that I can get my hands on. And your neck of the woods is, is certainly, um, well, well known for that.

I'm gonna be asking people for this tour, you know, where and what, um, I should be having in the area, because I know that, you know, the, the town has changed quite a bit since the last time I was there. Um, culinarily. So this time I'm gonna go out and only eat where the fans tell me to eat.

Dalia: Ooh, I love that.

Yeah, we can definitely help you out. Okay. Geographically, at least Florida is the south, but in a lot of ways Florida is its own sort of beast. So what do you think makes good southern food and how do you see [00:03:00] Florida fitting into that picture?

Alton: Oh, I'm sorry. I think of Florida is completely its own region and I have ever since I was a kid, you know, my, although I was born in California, I, I spent a lot of my childhood in, in north Georgia and with, uh, grandparents who would, uh, we would drive down in, into Florida, you know, in with cars, with no air conditioning, that kind of thing.

And my main memory, culinary memory is. Smoked fish, um, eating a lot of smoked fish, eating ginormous oysters, and we never got far enough south to really run into, to great Cuban food. But I have always thought of Florida as very much, its its own its own thing. Its south as in its, you know, south of New York.

It is south of Georgia, but I don't think of it as the south, although I'm sure there are plenty of people. You know, and the panhandle who would, uh, who would disagree with me, but for me, I just, I, I conjure very specific flavors and textures when I think about Florida.

Dalia: Mm. Yeah. I feel like North Florida and southern Georgia are more southern than [00:04:00] South Florida, so it's a little bit of a

Alton: like Oh, oh, absolutely.

Oh, no abs ab that's absolutely true. I mean, I, I, I get that. Um, no, Southern, Southern Florida's, not even the United States. I mean, it's, it's its own country practically from a food standpoint.

Dalia: For sure. Miami definitely has its own vibe. Okay. So you mentioned you're, you're doing these unplugged dates and we all know you've gotten to tour the country with Good Eats, Good Eats Reloaded, and of course with these live shows.

So what are the changes that you've made to your cooking from what you've picked up on through your travels?

Alton: I would say that my cooking or my cooking methodologies have, have changed as much as maybe the way that I eat. Um, I, I would say that the travels have had more effect on my eating habits, what I eat, how I eat it, who I eat it with than probably my, my cooking.

I mean, you can pick up, you know, once you're my age, you know, you may pick up some extra techniques, but you're not gonna change anything in the, in the fundamental engine room of [00:05:00] your, of your, you know, your cooking methodologies. Hard to do that, you know, when you, when you get to be this age. Um, but I do pick up, you know, odds and ends that are more cultural, that have, I think, more to do with the way we break bread together rather than the way you make the bread.

Dalia: Mm. Say more about that.

Alton: You know, I, when you go across country, um, you realize that. There are a thousand million little Americas, and the flavors that people put together, the, uh, the, the way that they choose to, um, eat certain things, um, could change your perspective on how you look at ingredients or how you, you think about flavors, you know, um, there, there are parts in Nebraska where they eat, you know, chili on their cinnamon rolls.

For instance, and they're very particular about how they do it. You know, you can't just, uh, go dumping chili on top of a cinnamon roll. You, you, you, you pull the cinnamon roll apart and dip it into the chili. Now, that's not something I'd ever encountered before. [00:06:00] And I'm not saying that I'm doing that every day.

I'm not eating chili with cinnamon rolls every day. But I'm, I think in a slightly different way because of that. And I think about flavors and I think about what

the foods are that around me and why we eat the things that we do a little more maybe thoughtfully, uh, than, than I used to.

Dalia: Ooh, that does sound good.

At first it sounded weird, but now I'm like, Nope, I'm, I'm all in. That sounds amazing. Well shout out to, uh, Zest listener John Barolo for that question. Thank you. John. I know you said you haven't, good question. Changed. Yeah, he's, he's awesome. He's a big foodie. I know you said you haven't changed maybe how you're cooking at this point, because.

You're sort of set in your ways, but also set

Alton: in my ways.

Dalia: Yes. I'm, I didn't

Alton: wanna,

Dalia: okay. But it probably also,

Alton: that's true. Fine.

Dalia: Still open to new things, but I'm sure the way people are responding to you has changed because as a culture, we've changed, you know, when I was a kid, we only ordered pizza on our birthday, and now we order pizza like once a month.

So how have the audience questions changed in the [00:07:00] decades that you've been doing this?

Alton: I think that the, the questions that I'm asked used to be, um, very scientific, or no, that's not true. The, in the beginning the questions I got were almost all practical. How do I do this? You know, how do I do that? Then they became more scientific.

Um, you know, why, why do I do this? Explain how this works. And now I get a lot more questions that are a bit more philosophical, you know, more about the. You know, the, the, the reasons behind things from a kind of a humanist standpoint, because I think people are kind of lost, uh, in a lot of ways right now.

And food is still one of those things that kind of holds us together as a, as a people, as a culture. Um, and so I think the people are constantly kind of reexamining, um, their, their value sets with within that, within that model, you know, looking to, to get. Meaning, um, outta food in, in a more spiritual way and, and in a more psychological [00:08:00] way.

So I, I think those are the, the big changes.

Dalia: Ooh, I like that. Do you have a comfort food that kind of brings you back to that feeling of home and meaning?

Alton: Yeah, martinis.

Dalia: We'll leave it there. Okay? Absolutely. Okay. That's a fantastic answer.

Okay, so you have this message of, you know, good eats and cooking can be fun, and you also [00:09:00] have all these tricks up your sleeve and all this science and all this knowledge. So how. Can we make cooking more approachable for people? Because when they see someone like you, one side of their brain is probably thinking, oh my gosh, that's so cool.

I definitely wanna do that. But there are people who are like, I don't even know how to make scrambled eggs. How am I supposed to even come close to what he is doing?

Alton: My food has gotten simpler and simpler and simpler because I've definitely realized that, you know, scrambled eggs, for instance, I don't think there's a better dish on the planet than scrambled eggs.

And there's a thousand million different ways to make scrambled eggs, and there are a thousand different techniques for scrambled eggs. You could literally do nothing but make scrambled eggs for a year and never have the same plate of food twice. I like that because understanding that simply requires paying attention and, um.

What I call thoughtful cooking, which is that you, you plan what you're gonna do, you do it, and then you take notes about what you did and how it went. You know, and then you learn from that. And, [00:10:00] and that's something that anybody can do. There's no, I, I'm, I don't accept that whole thing of, oh my gosh, I can't even boil water.

No, no, no. You simply choose not to boil water. So either live with that or boil the water because there's, there's, there's no, there is no great mystery. Now, most of us are not ever gonna cook like people with, you know, a lot of white coats in their, in their closet. I'm not going to, I don't want to, I don't want to cook restaurant food.

I want to cook my food at home. If I want restaurant food, I will go to a restaurant and have it. So the, the first thing we've gotta do is, is stop thinking that just because we've had all these chefs on all these food shows that we have to try to cook like that and you're not going to, that's all they do.

Right. That's all they do and they get paid for it, you know? Um, so I, I think that we have to set that aside and that's one of the bad things that food television shows have done, which is to, to make people feel one that they've gotta perform when they cook. And number two, that they have to cook at a restaurant level, which is just ridiculous.

Dalia: Yeah. [00:11:00] And I think eating restaurant food, even if we're not watching these shows, it makes us think that we should be able to do that at home. So what are your thoughts on social media? I mean,

Alton: well, no, no, I don't, I don't think that, I don't think that's right. Wait, wait, wait. Say that because I, I don't agree with you.

Dalia: Okay.

Alton: I think that, that it doesn't. You say, say that last couple of sentences again. Let's talk about this.

Dalia: So, so, um, I have friends and family members who rely heavily on restaurant food, and then the food that they cook at home or that's prepared for them in their mind is not as good. So why would they want home cooking when they could have restaurant food every night?

Alton: Well, I don't think they should be having restaurant food every night.

Dalia: I don't

Alton: think so. That's a real disservice. That's a real disservice to home cooking. And that makes it sound to me like they're actually valuing that food quite simply. 'cause they don't know what's in it, you know? I mean. If you

made, if you made food at home, the way that restaurant food is made, it probably would taste as good.

But you know, people don't realize the massive amounts of fat [00:12:00] that are used in restaurant food. The massive amounts of salt, the massive amounts of sugar, you wouldn't want it, you know, and if you knew what was in it, you know, if restaurant food came delivered to your door with the recipe attached, you'd probably not eat at restaurants as much.

Dalia: Wow. Yeah. I, I 100% agree. Okay. So do you have any thoughts on a lot of these social media influencers? I mean, they, they wanna be you really? Do you think that's helping or hurting what you do?

Alton: Well, the world's changed and the media landscape has changed. You know, dinosaurs ruled the earth for how many millions a years, and they were gone.

You know, I'm not saying I'm a dinosaur, but evolve or die, you know, if there's anything that I. Take issue with is that, I'm gonna say about 95% of food content creators are not creating edible food. They're creating visual spectacle. Uh, they're creating, it's clickbait. It's not. Food and [00:13:00] it couldn't, it couldn't be eaten and it's incredibly wasteful.

And then I would say that about, uh, 5%, well, no, a lot more of that, of people that are, uh, presenting recipes on, uh, social media are plagiarizing them without giving credit to the. The sources of, of those original recipes. Um, so I kind of wish we were back in the day where most of our recipes we were getting from good food magazines and newspapers where things were vetted and things were edited carefully and people had a sense of responsibility for the outcome.

Most of what is on social media is just there to get you to watch it, which means it's essentially food pornography.

Dalia: Hmm. I think what you bring is, and what the newspapers bring, and I have a background in newspapers, is trust. You know, I, I think that's what I'm hearing you say.

Alton: Yeah. But trust has to be earned.

You know, authority has to be earned, you know, um, and people will pop up on, you know, YouTube or they'll pop up and Instagram who have no authority. Um, and [00:14:00] we have no reason to trust them. And unless they earn that.

They don't get to have it, and it's a very hard place to earn trust because nobody is vouching for you.

You know, you become the head food writer at Chicago Tribune, or you know, or the New York Times, you've got. An editorial structure behind you that is vouching for you. Just like if you get a book deal and you, you publish a cookbook, the publisher of that cookbook is vouching for you. You're borrowing their credibility or sometimes they're borrowing yours.

And I think that's, that's a kind of currency that's just really difficult to acquire, um, on social media because anybody can do anything and say anything.

Dalia: Yeah, I like the idea of currency. Okay, well be because we do trust you so much. Before I let you go, several people wanted to know from you, just very practical kitchen advice.

What's a gadget that's not worth the hype and what's one that you can't live without?

Alton: I don't [00:15:00] like gadgets in general. I like tools that are multifunctional tools. You know, I could not probably, um, live without my toaster oven. I use toaster ovens all the time. I use my toaster oven for everything. I, I, if I can cook it in my toaster oven, I don't do it in a regular oven.

So some people might look around my kitchen and say, well, you don't really need a toaster oven. I'm like, absolutely. I fricking positively do need that. Um, something that, you know. Do you need an espresso machine? I, it depends on how much you like espresso. You know, that's how, how a lot of those things are.

I, I, by and large have a real problem with. Any tool that doesn't get used very often or is very bad at what it's designed for, um, 90%, um, of, of knife sharpening devices that people buy. Um, don't do anything but destroy knives. So I don't like those very much. And um, I really, really hate those little bitty, um, battery powered stir stick things.

They just make me angry.

Dalia: Well, we don't wanna make you angry. And I also am a toaster [00:16:00] oven girly. I could never live without it. Well, this was delightful. Is

there anything else you want us to know about your upcoming appearance in Clearwater?

Alton: It's a much more intimate show than any show that I've ever done.

I'm trying to play mostly small theaters and it's, um, a, a lot more conversation, a lot more talking than I usually do in these shows. And it's also about a 90 minute show that's not gonna be like a two and a half hour show with an intermission because we have a lot of people say they can't come to our shows because they're too long and they can't keep the babysitter that long.

So, um, I'm doing a, this is gonna be a 90 minute show with no intermission to just make it a little easier on people.

Dalia: Love that. Okay. Well we're really looking forward to you. Thank you so much. The entire team was so excited that I was getting to talk to you and Andrew Lucas, who will be editing this interview, he's based in Atlanta, but he says, uh, if you're ever up in that area, he will buy you, I guess a martini since that's your favorite.

Alton: I absolutely am available for that anytime.

Dalia: Sounds good. Thank you so much. We'll see you soon in Clearwater.

Alton: Thank you so much for your time and for having me on. I appreciate it.[00:17:00]

Dalia: That was Alton Brown. If you are interested in catching his live show in Clearwater on April 25th, you can find a link to ticket information in the show notes of this episode or on our website, the zest podcast.com. Special thanks to everyone who submitted questions. I worked in a couple, but we only had a few minutes together and I had a laundry list of stuff I wanted to ask him of course, and huge thank you to Katie Pedretty and Taylor McLamb at Ruth Eckerd Hall, who made this interview possible. 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.