

The Zest S12E17

Kerstin: [00:00:00] It is an act of self-care. It's self-care on a plate. It's saying I'm worth it. It's saying, you know, I love myself.

Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: Citrus, Seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State Today, a table for one can be pretty fun.

This holiday season, we're doing things a little differently around here, while everyone else is stressing over 20 pound turkeys and complicated side dishes, we are celebrating the joys of cooking for one. Kerstin Decook is the author of several cookbooks, including *Dinner for One: One Pan, One Plate, One Happy Belly*.

She's here to show us that a solo meal doesn't have to mean microwave, mac and cheese. It can be delicious and even empowering. Based in Port St. Lucie, Kerstin shows us how to reduce [00:01:00] waste. I know that's a big issue when grocery shopping and cooking for one person and she offers tips for making every solo meal feel extra special because you are worth it and.

Exclusively for Zest listeners. How cool is this? Kerstin is offering a behind the kitchen door experience on January 3rd, 2026 at 11:00 AM Eastern time. You can join a free online event called *New Year, Fresh flavors: How to Cook for Yourself with Confidence and Joy*, and you can find more information about registering for that free webinar on our website, thespodcast.com, or in the show notes of this episode.

So. Whether you often eat a loan or you could use some much needed me time after a hectic Thanksgiving, grab a fork just for you and let's dig in.[00:02:00]

Kerstin: My husband has always been a mariner and a captain since 1984, so we did a lot of boating in the Pacific Northwest, beautiful San Juan Islands, whatnot, and his dream was always to have a charter, yet a small one, semi-private to. Take people to the beautiful islands all the way up to Alaska. And while that was a dream and we talked about it, I never really thought about it coming through.

He was in a mortgage industry. I was a realtor at the time. And one day he came home and he said to me, you know, honey, I'm not getting any younger. I wanna

do this now are you in? And I'm thinking, well that sounds exciting, but we would have to just drop everything and do something completely different.

Which I thought we can do, and since I did, you know, was familiar with boating, I knew I was kind of be the first maid and did all the boat stuff. So I asked him, so if we do this, who's gonna be the chef to cuisine? And he's looking at me [00:03:00] like. Are you honey? You, you're gonna be the chef to cuisine. What are you thinking?

And I thought to myself, it's like, are you like crazy? I'm not chef material. I've, you know, I can cook. I'm a average to good cook, but I'm certainly not chef to cuisine material. But at the same time, we couldn't, we weren't able to hire a chef, so I had to. Uplevel my game in the kitchen because he was saying, well, you can just serve spaghetti and meatball.

And I was thinking, well, that's not gonna give us five star reviews, not in private chart yet. So what I did is I upleveled my game and I started studying culinary art. Not to become a chef, but to widen my. Knowledge and gain experience and to think like a chef, to be able to cook like a chef because that turns cooking for more of a chore into something you actually enjoy.

I went to culinary schools in Canada. I went to different places in Europe to study, and what happens is, because in culinary school you learn [00:04:00] methods and techniques, you don't learn to follow recipes, right? It changed my whole perspective on cooking. All of a sudden it turned it from being, you know, a chore into an adventure, being able to, you know, like just grab some ingredients.

Try this method, try that method. Just try different things. And I thought, if that is possible for me, I wanna teach others. So it can be possible for them to turn that cooking is a chore. More into cooking can be joy, it can be adventurous, it can be fun, and it's actually great because you're doing something great for yourself.

So that's when I started. My first cookbook in the same series, *The Confident Home Cook*, and it called *Stress to Impress Your Salad*. That is, and I started with homemade dressings because it's instant gratification. It's so quick to learn, you can do it in five minutes, and the book was very well received and while I was [00:05:00] writing it.

One of my friends says, well, Kerstin salad stuff is all fine and dancey, but why don't you write something for all of us flying solo in the kitchen? And I thought,

okay, so there must be some sort of a struggle there because I heard him loud and clear, you know, inspiration, flatten. Eating chips over the sink, going out, doing all these things.

And I thought, okay, I'm not a solo cook because at least cook for two or four or six, but I thought challenge accepted and I didn't wanna just write a book to put recipes in there because there's a million out there already. I don't need to put another one in the mix. Right. So I really thought about.

The struggles of home cooks. Why are they not cooking? What are they struggling with? What are their challenges? And that's why I, my book is kind of a little bit different, structured. It addresses the struggles, but in a fun and [00:06:00] kind of sassy way. We're trying to overcome those challenges and then we're making cooking fun.

Dalia: Yeah, and I can relate to your friend who's eating chips over the sink, or for me it's usually like a bowl of popcorn while I'm watching Netflix. If you know I'm the only one home and it just feels like, why bother? It's just me. What's the point? I mean, how is cooking for yourself an act of empowerment

Kerstin: first.

You have to think. We wanna acknowledge the challenges, right? So we wanna say, yeah, it is time consuming. It can be seen as wasteful, as as hard and as difficult. And then we wanna look at the consequences as to, okay, well. What happens if we go out and eat all the time or eat chips over the sink or order in, you know?

So we're wast not only wasting money, we're not making the healthiest choices, we're losing control over the ingredients and what we're eating. So we're giving away money, flavor, and nutrition, right, for ease of time [00:07:00] and convenience. And you know what, that reminds me of a very quick story. When my husband and I were standing in Naples at the pier and we were watching the pelicans dive over and over in the water trying to get a fish, and we were so mesmerized by that, and the guy came by and said, those birds are dedicated while we go to convenience store.

That stuck with me. It's like, wow, what a true statement. Right. So going back to your question, why it matters, it's because. It is an act of self-care. It's an it's self-care on a plate. It's saying, I'm worth it. It's saying, you know, I love myself. And it reminded me of the lady you had recently on the podcast, Denise Marsh, where she said, do it yourself.

Yes. Do it for your selfie, right? Yes. And not for anyone else. So it's just showing up for [00:08:00] yourself and basically honoring that, that you are a person and you deserve better than just leftover meals or take out meals. Chip over the zinc. No, Vincent Churchill once said, and I really like his statement, he said, you gotta feed your body something good so your soul can live in it.

Mm. And I really like that because it's basically saying, take good care of your body and then your soul will be healthy and happy and you nurture yourself. So that's why I think, you know, it's so important, and that's what part of me wrote this book. I really wanted to help solo cooks just to flip the switch on.

It's difficult, it's wasteful, it's this, it's that to, no, I'm actually worth it. So I wanna, I wanna find the way of making it fun.

Dalia: Oh, that's beautiful. Okay. Let's get practical because I know someone listening is thinking, well, maybe I could cook for myself, but all the food comes in really big packages and I can't [00:09:00] eat that much chicken at a time, or I can't eat a whole thing of spinach.

Do you have any grocery shopping or meal planning tips before we even get to the actual cooking? If I'm grocery shopping, yes. For one.

Kerstin: I mean, who, who thought that? Everything has to come in bulk. You know, like parsley in, in bundles and tortillas, and 24 pieces right in the bulk. So my suggestion isn't, that's how I shop for myself, even though I'm not a solo cook.

I usually go to the loose product section where you buy just one pepper, just one. Piece of whatever, maybe just two or three cel sticks. We don't have to buy these monster, you know, like 10 peppers in a bag. Right? So be smart about it. Just buying what you need. And then on the meat section, of course, sometimes they come in bigger portions, right?

So it's, it's coming home. Proportionate it right away. And then what you don't [00:10:00] use, you can freeze, especially meat or herbs. They freeze very easily. And then another thing, a tip straight from culinary school that saved many a dinner and a lot of food waste is I started using those deli containers. First of all, I don't know if you've heard of them, but they come in different sizes.

1, 2, 4, 6 cups. So the, they serve as measuring cups, they serve as storage. You can freeze them. And the beautiful thing about them is they're all one size fits

all. So, you know, buy in smaller amounts. If something is in bigger amounts, cut it to your portion, whether you like to eat a four ounce piece of protein or six ounce.

So cut it so that it suits you and then freeze what you don't use right away.

Dalia: That's a great tip. And I even do that for my own family because I think we make the mistake of like, oh, I made a big crock pot full of chili and I'm just gonna [00:11:00] freeze it in this giant block, but. You know, if, if I'm working from home and I just need lunch for myself, I just need one portion of chili, and then I can take out as many as I need.

Some stores will even split packages for you. I know Publix does. If there's, you know, six pieces of chicken and you only need two. You can ask them and they will actually repackage it for you right in the store. I, you just made me think of something else that I did. When I first moved from Ohio to Florida, I was living in an apartment.

I didn't know very many people, and my next door neighbor was a single mom with a little boy. We would swap dinners, so I would maybe cook a lasagna and she would cook a casserole and we would split it. And so I don't know if you know you listening, have anyone in your life like that, but if you can, you know, cook once and, and share with a friend and form a little dinner club, that can be great too.[00:12:00]

Okay, so you've given us some really good information on how to reduce waste and believe that we're worth it. So now we're at home, we're in the kitchen, you know, jeopardy on in the background. What are some ways that we can elevate the meal and make it feel as special as we deserve instead of just.

Eating it over the sink.

Kerstin: I have a little sign in my kitchen: *In This Kitchen We Dance* because it's all about, you know, it comes back to mind shift and to whether you sing. Cooking for yourself is a chore, or cooking is an adventure. It's something you do for yourself and you wanna make it fun. So I always put music on.

It's a must. Music, and I love to find a nice plate. Decorate my plate or just plate it nicely so it looks good, [00:13:00] because the eye eats too, right? So we're eating with our eyes first. Don't just dump it on your plate, right? Maybe set a candle even if, if you like, or just, I was talking to my daughter last night and she says, yeah, there's so many of us.

She's solo cook too. It's like, I don't sit. And use my phone and while I'm eating, scroll, scroll through the phone. No, you're making this me time. This is your me time. Put the music on. Find yourself something nice to drink, whatever. I'm not saying wine or, so some people don't drink alcohol, but it's something else, something sparkly, something that excites you and make it mealtime and really treat yourself as if you were the guest of honor.

And I think that just because I still, sometimes when my husband is not around, I cook for myself. And I just make it special. I mean, I just make it a special time versus, oh, well I just got to eat and so quick, quick, quick. Chow it down. No, use it as an half an hour me time. And yeah, that's, that's what I think is imp [00:14:00] important.

Dalia: That's beautiful. I love the candles and the music. It's a whole sensory experience. And the other thing I love about this is that a lot of us are intimidated to have guests. You know, it's the holidays. People are maybe entertaining a large, you know, number of people. And if. They haven't sort of gotten in those reps on their own of plating the food and making it look good and selecting the music and lighting the candles, then it can be really scary when other people come over because it feels like you're on stage.

But if you're used to doing this every night just for yourself or for your family, it's like no big deal to have a couple extra people.

Kerstin: Yes, totally. Do you know when it comes to solo cooking? Here's another thing, because I was really thinking about, you know, so the struggles, I actually think solo cooking is empowering because you have no one else to worry about.

You can be creative, you can flavor it the way you want it. Sometimes cooking for five people or a whole family, and I don't know, you know, it's like, oh. The one child doesn't [00:15:00] eat this, the next one doesn't eat that. My husband right now started because he has high blood pressure, no salt, no this, no that.

So it becomes actually difficult to cook for more people. So cooking for yourself is very empowering and it's freedom. It's being able to be creative and just, you know, make it your own adventure. So it's just adopting a different mindset. Can make a big difference. Yeah,

Dalia: you could be selfish. You can put olives on it if your partner hates olives, or you can use cheese if someone's allergic to dairy or whatever, because it's just you, you have to worry about.

That's amazing. Okay, so. We are worth it. We can put in just a little bit of extra effort and have a really nice experience. But what about those nights that everyone has where you are just too tired, you don't have the bandwidth. Do you have a go-to solo meal for times like those?

Kerstin: I actually have a few.

So in my cookbook, Jennifer one, [00:16:00] first of all. You will not find any meals that have specific like descriptions like chicken, but mushroom soup because you may not like chicken or mushrooms. Right? So it's, it's, it's very, all the, um, dishes have fun names to begin with. So one of the dishes that I is, one of my go-tos is called Excellent for.

Eggs, you know, a couple of eggs, leftover veggies, some cheese. It's done in 10 minutes. It's something simple, but it's very satisfying. Another one of the dishes that I love, it's called Flat Out Fabulous. So you take annan or sourdough or something, again, a little bit of some sauce, which you can make literally in three to four.

Some veggies. If you have, you can do canned tuna or canned anything, or just beans, you know, some cheese on top. Broil it and you'll be done. So there's a lot of, another one is like, get your wrap together. And I know it's like I have all these fun names. I love it because that is part of making cooking fun, right?

So lettuce [00:17:00] wraps, put whatever. Maybe you have, uh, uh, a pepper left in your fridge, or half a pepper or, or maybe you have half a cucumber, something, whatever. You open your fridge, you see what you got. Oh, and I got some lettuce leaves. So make yourself a lettuce wrap, drizzle some even just if you don't have a sauce, a little bit of oil, salt, and pepper, and a little bit of vinegar.

Fabulous. So you can make some quick, yummy, satisfying meals without even having to turn the stove on.

Dalia: I love that it's not intimidating. I love this no recipe framework because if you are cooking for a large group, maybe you don't have enough of an ingredient for everyone. But if you're just cooking for yourself, you can take a little bit of this and a little bit of that, whatever's left over, and you can turn it into something really special.

Eat it on, eat it on the good dishes. Why not?

Kerstin: And you know, and that's. Something else. So I wanna talk recipes for a second if that's okay. Because what recipes, and that is another struggle. So home cooks, well, what am I gonna cook? What am I gonna cook? So you spend 10 minutes looking in some recipe books that you have.[00:18:00]

First of all, it takes time. Then you may find out that you like this recipe, but then you find out that you don't have half the ingredients. So what happens? You're frustrated. You put the book away, you eat chips over the sink, right? So. Going back to culinary school, what I loved is that they taught us methods and techniques.

So when I get asked like, what tip could you give as home cooks, whether you're a solo or not, my first tip would be study some very simple techniques and methods like sorting, blanching, broiling, simmering. Because with those. Then you can take ingredients that you have and make a quick meal without having to follow a recipe, and that's why this book.

It's structured completely different. So I have this block party methods that I call it, and every dish is built the same way. So I'm giving you some base ingredients that would be like, whether you wanna use [00:19:00] any grain that you have, pasta, maybe potatoes, some veggies, look what's in your fridge. Then I'm giving you, you know, some ideas of power players, which would be a protein, and I can, and if you.

Like plant-based and there's plant-based proteins. And then I'm giving you your flavor crew ideas. So flavor crew means all the spices, all the herbs, and pick whatever suits your palette, and then I'm gonna give you how it's gonna go down. So it's kind of built almost like a game, you know? The bass players, the power players, the flavor crew, and now how it's gonna go down.

So, very simple steps, five to six steps on how to make it. And then I give you some wild cards at the end if you wanna make it extra, you know, crispy, extra hot, extra this, extra that. And every dish is built the same way, so that you can throw away your. F recipe following training wheels and creative on your own.

It gives you flexibility without [00:20:00] constraintment and, you know, like having to have certain things. No, you, you just cook with what you've got. Oh, this is, I think beautiful is

Dalia: great. This would make a great holiday gift, especially for like young adults or newly single people. I've never heard it described as recipes as training wheels, but you're right, that's exactly what they are.

I'm just curious like, 'cause I detect an accent. Where did you grow up and maybe what's a dish that reminds you of that time?

Kerstin: I actually grew up behind the Iron Curtain in Russian occupied East Germany. Lived there for 16 years of my life and actually cooking was a real challenge because you couldn't go into store and buy what you wanted or needed.

You had to literally just buy what was available and cook with very simple, simple things. So one, if I tell you this dish, you was like, what? It's called buttermilk potatoes. It's a very simple dish. Made with [00:21:00] cooked potatoes and buttermilk, and if you had, you would throw some sausage in it or some bacon or something.

But super simple, tastes very delicious. I still make it today. My family loves it 57 years later. But yeah, so we would cook just with what we had, and most of the dishes were very super simple. We had no choice. You, you just make ends meet with what's available. Right.

Dalia: Wow. Well thank you for sharing that and I love that that's still one of your comfort foods.

Okay. So given that background where you had such limited availability of food and, and you didn't always have a lot of control, I mean, someone is like standing in their kitchen right now listening to this with access to any ingredient they can think of, but they just don't have maybe the motivation. So talk to me about why cooking for yourself.

Brings you such joy. I mean, I can hear it in your voice.

Kerstin: You know, I think it's just, I really found out that it's. [00:22:00] If you wanna see it as an adventure, it can be an adventure, you know, because you can be creative. And once you, again, once you learn methods, what happens is you start to become more confident and through confidence comes creativity.

And through creativity comes variety. And then you can see cooking as an adventure, whether it's for solo cooking or not. So for me, it's literally an adventure. Every night I look forward to cooking because I can't wait. To try new things and you know, I admit I have flavor flops, I have things like, what was I thinking?

This is like, woo. But I don't see it as a failure or as like, oh my gosh, this is awful. No, I was just, okay, let's stop for a second. What did I do wrong? What was, what's missing here? What should I do? So I, I basically call my flavor flops, flavor research.

Dalia: Okay. Last question before I let you go. We talked about cooking for yourself at home and how it saves you, [00:23:00] uh, money and it's better for your body usually than getting takeout, but there are times when people might wanna dine out alone, whether they're in their own town or they're traveling, and that can be awkward too.

I know. I feel kind of. Awkward about it. Like I've, I've done this where I will pick up the food at the restaurant and sit and eat it in my car because I don't wanna eat in a restaurant by myself. So I don't know if you have much experience with dining in restaurants alone, but do you have any advice for making that experience more comfortable?

Kerstin: Well, you know, it comes back to, I think it was always perceived as a stigma, especially for women, right? I think it's coming back to a mindset of owning it. It's like you are worse to eat by yourself, whether you eat at home or out. Own it. Be confident in it. Why not enjoy it? Talk to people. Just I think just own it.

Dalia: That's beautiful.

Kerstin: I love, you know what I'm saying?

Dalia: I absolutely do. I feel empowered. People will call it taking myself out on a date, which I think is great too. Wow. [00:24:00] This has been fantastic. You know, my husband, by the way, sometimes if he's traveling for work, he will eat at a restaurant that has a bar and he'll sit at the bar because then he can chat with the bartender, chat with the other people who are there.

Doesn't feel awkward at all.

Kerstin: You know? For me it's just like. Think about how many things you do for other people. We give all day long to other people and often forget about ourselves. Why do we always take step back and not give to ourselves? We're. And just always pour out to others. So cooking is an act of self-care.

You have control so much more over what you eat, what you feed your body. So that's why I really like to encourage and bring that spark that what would

change Cooking for me. I wanna bring that spark to others in the kitchen. Say you, we said let's cook together. Let's have some fun. Let's rock the kitchen.

Oh my gosh. And let's make it. An adventure.

Dalia: I love it. I'm fired up. I'm gonna make myself a, a nice lunch today. Yay. Well, thank you so [00:25:00] much. Thank you so much for your time. It was great to talk to you. You're, you're like a two for one because we get the, the practical tips and we get the inspiration. So thank you so

much.

Kerstin: Oh, thank you so much for having me. It was fun. Hmm.

Dalia: Kerstin Decook is the author of *Dinner for One One Pan, one Plate, one Happy Belly*. She shared her no recipe recipe for Bangkok in a Pan, which is a yummy Thai- inspired stir fry dish. And you can find it on our website, the zest podcast.com. Now, that's also where you'll find the link to register for that free behind the kitchen door experience that Kerstin is offering exclusively for Zest listeners, it's on January 3rd, 2026 at 11:00 AM So go ahead and put it in your phone calendar right now. It's free. It's a live event. And again, the title is New Year Fresh Flavors, how to Cook for Yourself With Confidence and Joy so you can [00:26:00] find more information on our website. Does zest podcast.com or.

Check out the show notes of this episode. 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.