

# The Zest S12E9

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I've, I've been to everybody's shop.

**Dalia:** I am Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, Southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Today we're brewing up coffee and conversation with Emmanuel Dunbar of Royal Diaspora.

Emmanuel Dunbar grew up hating coffee Now coffee is his life. Emmanuel owns Royal Diaspora Coffee Company. It's a cafe and community gathering space in Tampa. While Royal Diaspora is a proudly black-owned business, Emmanuel's customers are as diverse as the way they take their cup of Joe. So everyone should feel [00:01:00] welcome.

We recently visited Emmanuel at Royal Diaspora, and he made me a fantastic decaf oat milk latte. Don't judge me in this conversation. Emmanuel breaks down his love-hate relationship with coffee. Spoiler alert, it was never about the case. He also shares his big plans for the space, which go far beyond Java beans.

Thank you so much for having us. We're sitting here. In Royal Diaspora on Busch Boulevard? Yes ma'am. Ma'am, in the heart of Tampa, we've got, you know, we can hear your fridge in the background. There's traffic going by. You're in the heart of the city. Okay. So how'd you get into coffee? Was there a moment when you knew coffee is gonna be bigger for me than it is for the average person?

**Emmanuel:** I remember, um, maybe this was like 2015 or 2014. Um, I was just like nagging my wife about like having a coffee shop, having a coffee shop, wanting to get into [00:02:00] coffee. And, and she said, uh, the words that, that kind of changed in my life up in the, as as far as like the coffee, uh, and everything that we're doing now.

She was just like, stop talking about it and do it.

**Dalia:** Oh, yes, I like her.

**Emmanuel:** Me and my mom are really close. My siblings are, are a little bit older, so my whole high school career, my whole high school life, I was in the house by myself with my mom, and we moved around a lot. Everything, my whole life was really not, um, consistent.

We stayed in a lot of different places. We moved almost every year, but the one thing that was consistent is every morning my mom got up and made coffee. Ooh. If we was in a hotel, if we was at a friend's house, if we was at our own place, she always got up and made coffee. And if she didn't, she went to the Dunking Donuts where they knew her name and she didn't even have to order.

She just pulled up and they was like, Hey, Miss Suzy, come on up. So my mom really loves coffee and has always loved coffee. Not the way that I love coffee, but she's loved coffee. I think that's my [00:03:00] inspiration about making a coffee shop.

**Dalia:** Aw, so coffee is home,

**Emmanuel:** coffee is home.

**Dalia:** Royal Diaspora. I love the name.

How did you come up with that name?

**Emmanuel:** Uh, so the word, uh, diaspora just means scattered. When we were thinking about what we're gonna name the company and the logo and everything like that, I, I always have been a person who love to collaborate. I love bringing people in. I love being on a team. The word diaspora means scattered.

And coffee's originally from Africa, it's from Ethiopia. And when they came and they took the people, they took the coffee too. And they planted it in the places that they went. So the places that they colonized, they took the coffee with them and they, they planted it there. So not only did the, the people of the diaspora get scattered, but the coffee also got scattered with the people.

So. We just came together on with the Royal Disapora.

**Dalia:** I love that. And when I hear diaspora I'm like, okay, this is a black-owned business. Mm-hmm. I wanna support it. Okay. Right. So do you find

people coming in because they wanna support a [00:04:00] black-owned business?

**Emmanuel:** Absolutely. Like we have people who are, if, if it's any event going on in the city.

We are going to be very busy with people from out of town coming in, people driving from Orlando, driving from Sarasota, driving from all over the state just to come here. If they're coming into town, they wanna make it a point to come to Royal Diaspora. Like we have black people who are coming from all over, who are just grabbing stuff off the shelf who want to support, and I think that that has been one of the most.

Eye-opening things like they always say, Hey, black people are like, uh, crabs in a barrel, right?

**Dalia:** What do you mean crabs in a barrel? For people who don't know.

**Emmanuel:** So they say black people are like crabs in a barrel. Um, and that we, like whenever we're trying to climb to the top, someone's always pulling you down, right?

But the key question is, why are the crabs in a barrel that's not where they supposed to be? They supposed to be on the beach through the crabs, act like that when they're on the beach. They do not. So putting us. In a barrel is just the same thing that they did [00:05:00] when they took all these black people and they took all these resources and they put us all into projects and then they say, oh, it's so violent there.

But yeah, this is a system, this is a place that you made. What about if you put us, if you give us the opportunity equal footing, what can we do?

**Dalia:** Yes.

**Emmanuel:** So get off my high horse.

**Dalia:** No, I love it. Stay on the horse. I'm, I'm climbing up the horse with you. And speaking of climbing with people, you are very adamant about supporting other black-owned businesses.

I'm looking around the shop, you've got like products and business cards of other people. Why is that so important to you?

**Emmanuel:** So, since, since 2017, when I came back from Brazil with my coffee, I've been to every coffee shop in the city, and it was hard for me to get people to even take free samples.

**Dalia:** Why?

**Emmanuel:** I don't know.

So I, I always said, when I get my space, man, I'm gonna make sure that I give people. Who are making products an opportunity to have their product be seen. And if you look, like you said, if you look around the shop, you see this, uh, we have different vendors, [00:06:00] um, from food to candles. And if you see the art that's in the shop is different local vendors that we let them come in for a month and they have opportunity to sell their products or promote their products.

And then after a month. Then we take 'em down and we put new, new products up. So if you, if you make art or you do anything in the city and you want a place to highlight your product, come in and as long as you got your EIN number and you have your insurance, you have all your paperwork, right? We'll put you in.

**Dalia:** I love that. What would you say has been the toughest part of your journey? And it's probably hard to even separate. What is a normal barrier that any entrepreneur would overcome, and what are the added challenges as a black-owned business owner?

**Emmanuel:** Mm-hmm. I wanna see how far I wanna go with this.

**Dalia:** Go all the way.

**Emmanuel:** The first thing I would say is if, if anybody is making a food, if you're going to get into a restaurant or if you're going to make a coffee [00:07:00] shop or a bakery, I would say the best advice that I can give you is go to a location that has already been that before, or a place that was that right before you, or have already been that in the past.

We spent a year trying to get permits to get the appropriate zoning and all that stuff in this location. And that cost us about \$35,000. 'cause we was paying rent here the whole time that we wasn't using the location.

**Dalia:** How long have you been in this location?

**Emmanuel:** In this location? We've been in this location since 2024.

**Dalia:** Oh, pretty recent.

**Emmanuel:** Yeah, but we didn't open up until April.

**Dalia:** This past April?

**Emmanuel:** Yeah.

**Dalia:** What? Yeah, April, 2025.

**Emmanuel:** April, 2025.

Okay.

So for a full year I just. Went to all the other coffee shops in the city. So I've been to almost every coffee shop. I sat by the register, just listened to what people was talking about, felt the vibes, felt like, uh, what everybody was doing.

So that's how, that's how I know, like when I say, when I tell people, Hey [00:08:00] man, nobody else is doing this the way that we are doing it. Nobody else is doing this the way that we are doing it. I've, I've been to everybody's shop.

**Dalia:** What do you mean by that?

**Emmanuel:** Uh, just like the, the in being intentional. So here we also are, um.

We are, I'm gonna say we are trying, we are trying to offer free therapy and financial literacy to everybody who lives in this area.

**Dalia:** Ooh. Coffee and free therapy. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Is this Temple Terrace?

**Emmanuel:** This is this Tampa?

**Dalia:** This is considered Tampa.

**Emmanuel:** 56 is Temple Terrace.

**Dalia:** Okay, gotcha. So we're just in the heart of Tampa,

**Emmanuel:** in the heart of Tampa.

**Dalia:** Why? Why is it important for you as a coffee shop owner? Mm-hmm. To offer therapy and financial literacy classes?

**Emmanuel:** I think that like nothing really matters if you're not mentally available, right? So if you're not mentally available. It doesn't really matter anything else that's going on in your life if you, if, if you're not right in your head, if you're having mental health issues.

So I think that is really important. And I ha I have a degree in sociology and criminology. I worked, [00:09:00] um, for SQL Care, which was a wraparound service. They had case managers and they had therapists. We went to your house. Uh, we worked together and that job was really impactful. They didn't pay us anything, but the job itself was really impactful.

And, and, and that was the, that was the last job that I had, and I, and I really felt like that job was, um. Before their time, uh, and the resources that we was using, and I seen the effects of the family from just having therapy and having someone who cared about what they were doing and it would hold them responsible.

Sometimes people just don't know what they're doing wrong.[00:10:00]

**Dalia:** I am looking at your T-shirt. It's Royal Diaspora Coffee Company and it says Quality power community.

**Emmanuel:** Community.

**Dalia:** So that really encompasses the community aspect of it.

**Emmanuel:** Mm-hmm. And that, and that's what we're, we're trying to do. I think where we fall short, some of us as black people when we open up businesses that our customer service is just not there.

And we are very intentional about our customer service. It is the number one thing that we talk about when you're hired is the number one thing. When we talk about at the beginning of the day, uh, we, like I tell them, uh, Walmart sells milk for \$2 and 50 cents. Publix sells the same milk for \$4 and 85 cents, and people would rather go to Publix because of the customer service.

People will pay more. To feel better

**Dalia:** Yes. To have a shopping cart that works.

**Emmanuel:** That works. That works. [00:11:00]

**Dalia:** No shade to Walmart, right? Yeah. You have a poster here with Anthony Gilbert of Call Anthony who reviews, uh, mom and pop food spots online and we had him on the podcast and he, that's my guy. I know I love him.

He's got his own banana pudding latte here. I have to try that the next time I come. But he said the same thing, like a lot of these small businesses don't realize what they're doing wrong. Our food is good, our location is good. What's the problem? Well, maybe the person behind the counter had an attitude.

**Emmanuel:** Right? Yeah.

**Dalia:** Right. So that's so important. And

**Emmanuel:** so important, man. And just paying attention to the quality. Everything that we have is quality. We're not taking any shortcuts.

**Dalia:** Yes.

**Emmanuel:** First of all, our coffee is coming directly from the farm. Every coffee that we have here, I have a relationship with the farmer, or I went to the farm and got it myself.

Where we get coffee from Brazil, Guatemala, Kenya, Nicaragua, Jamaican, Blue Mountain Coffee. We have some Colombian coffee and we don't have all these coffees at one time. We just have whatever coffee is harvest at that time. So right now we have uh, blue Mountain Coffee, Kenyan Coffee, and [00:12:00] Nicaragua Coffee.

At the end of the year, we'll have a little bit more of the, uh, central America and South American coffees when it's time to harvest. So we'll have a little bit more of the Brazilian coffees. We'll have some Guatemala coffee we'll have. So we just try to just get the coffee when it's as fresh as possible, not order a whole lot of it.

So if you come in and you really like some Kenyan coffee. You better buy a bag. 'cause you don't know. We don't know how long that bag is gonna last, and once that bag is out, we're just gonna get a new coffee that's freshly harvested from the next farm. Yes. So,

**Dalia:** okay, we started this conversation with you saying that you've moved around a lot as a kid and so.

Wherever the coffee is or wherever. Miss Susie, is that your mom, right? Yeah. Yeah. Miss Susie, does she have her own drink here?

**Emmanuel:** Nah, she, she actually was like, Hey, you got everybody else drinks and I don't have a drink, so when she comes back, we gonna probably make her a drink. And I think I, I've been thinking about something that I think she'll like,

**Dalia:** oh yes.

**Emmanuel:** Yeah.

**Dalia:** Okay. So wherever Miss Susie and the coffee are, [00:13:00] that's home.

**Emmanuel:** That's home.

**Dalia:** What is it? Talk to me about the experience of holding the mug, drinking the coffee. What is that for you that is so comforting?

**Emmanuel:** I think it, it, it makes me, it takes me back to a time, uh, that was a lot more simple. Um, that it was just me and my mom and my stepdad, and I didn't have a whole lot of bills.

I didn't have kids, didn't have a wife, you know, you didn't have all these responsibilities and all these weights of life. It. Yeah. It just takes me back to a simpler time, you know, that, uh, think when things were a little bit easier.

**Dalia:** Mm. I love that. Mm-hmm. Just like a cup of simplicity. Right. Joy. Right. How old do you think you were when you started drinking coffee?

**Emmanuel:** 25.



**Dalia:** Oh, okay. Maybe 25. I thought you were gonna say a kid.

**Emmanuel:** Nah, I hated coffee. Really? Yeah. I mean, my mom used to drink it all the time. She used to make us like. She used to make us wait, make us late 'cause she [00:14:00] was making her coffee. Or if she couldn't, she'd be like, oh, you gotta get up 30 minutes early. We gotta go buy Dunkin Donuts.

So it is always been like a inconvenience at first, but I didn't know that that was quality time and. And that on those rides we'll be talking, we'll be doing different stuff. So it was really quality time that I was spending with my mom. Wow. And when I got older, looking back on it, I kind of reflected on it.

You get a different point of view. Hindsight is 2020. Yeah. So, uh, I used to work at juvenile prisons. Really? What is what it is? So to go to jail is a juvenile. You have to really do a lot. They, they on like a point system and it's really hard to get points. But once you start getting points. Or once you get in front of a judge and he sees that you are habitual, it's really easy to get into a program.

So, uh, I worked at a level six program, which I think was like six to nine months. And then I worked at the Big Boy, uh, facility in Palmetto, um, where it was, uh, people who were there [00:15:00] for long periods of time. I think, I think the longest was 18 months, but it really gave me an insight of. What was going on in the system, and it really made me start getting on my own journey and making me think, okay, when I get a chance, I'm gonna actually not be checking boxes and really help people if I have opportunity to.

**Dalia:** That's amazing. And now you're doing that through coffee

**Emmanuel:** Now i'm doing that through coffee.

**Dalia:** Incredible. Mm-hmm. Well, thank you for the coffee and the beautiful conversation.

**Emmanuel:** Welcome, you welcome.

**Dalia:** Emmanuel Dunbar owns Royal Diaspora Coffee Company in Tampa. It's such a cool space. I know you wanna see pictures, so just head to Facebook or Instagram and search the Zest podcast.

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.