

The Zest S12E18

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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. Today, tide to table. We've got your preview of Tampa Oyster Festival.

Once the holiday hoop buffet fades, we all need something delicious to look forward to. And luckily we've got just the thing. Tampa Oyster Festival. It happens on January 10th, so mark your calendar now because this event checks all the boxes. It's outdoors during Florida's best weather. It's packed with fresh seafood, live music, and the kind of friendly crowd that makes you glad you came hungry.[00:01:00]

And bonus, Tampa Oyster Festival supports a great cause. Frameworks of Tampa Bay, which is a nonprofit that helps kids build emotional intelligence and the life skills they'll lean on for years to come. I know we all. Could benefit from making sure those kids have that. So joining us for a sneak peek of the festival is one of the organizers, Bill Murphy.

He'll share his favorite ways to enjoy oysters and even dive into the ethics of eating them.

Bill: My family's originally from Brooklyn, New York, and my grandfather was a big clam guy, so like right around Brooklyn, uh, Sheep's Head Bay was like a big seafood place and he loved clams and I couldn't stand them, but that brininess, you know, like he used to always let us eat it. Now we moved to North Carolina and my summer job one year was working at a place called a Shucks, and it was, I was an [00:02:00] oyster shucker and I had never really eaten oysters before or shuck them definitely. But, uh, I had this job and the guys taught me how to shuck oysters and I probably ate like one out of every six that I shuck just to maintain quality control.

But, uh, I fell in love with them then. And then living in kind of North Carolina. And, you know, going down to Charleston every once in a while, they have a

great culture of like oyster roasts and low country boils. And just, you know, kind of utilizing all that great produce and food that they have down there that's, you know, kind of local.

So it just became part of the routine. And when I met Wake and Doug and the guys that are in D&D, you know, we just started roasting oysters for fun and that's how everything got started.

Dalia: Wow. When you were shucking oysters, any injuries?

Bill: Um, there would be an occasional slip of the, uh, of the oyster knife.

I'm, I'm [00:03:00] not gonna lie. I mean, it takes, it takes some practice. I'm definitely not up to my game on shucking raw, raw oysters. We get the, the, the pros to come in for Oyster Fest and like, it's amazing to me how many they can go through. I mean, we go through so many oysters now at Oyster Fest and we've got the raw ones, we've got the grilled ones, we've got the PO Boys.

They all need to be shuck. So, uh, it's nice to have like guys that really know what they're doing and, uh, don't hurt themselves as much as I used to.

Dalia: Yeah. Okay. Since you brought up Oyster Fest, let's talk about it. How did it come about? People want to attend, so give us all the details.

Bill: It's a great event.

So John Wakefield. His daughters were part of the Frameworks kind of program, and he became part of the board and he was just looking for ways that, uh, that we could, you know, help generate funds and, and kind of draw attention to what we, what Frameworks was doing. At the [00:04:00] time, uh, wake and I would, you know, do oyster roasts for friends that were, that had businesses and wanted to have like, you know, kind of Christmas parties or stuff like that, and they were really popular and everybody, it was just a good vibe, right?

You know, I think everybody had a good time. Uh, the food was great. It created this, uh, kind of social kind of interaction that we really liked. So he proposed it to Frameworks and they thought it was a great idea. So we did the first one in the parking lot of Frameworks office, uh, over in, uh, Seminole Heights.

And we had like 20 people there. You know, we roasted like. Maybe 10 boxes of oysters. And, and it was the same vibe, right? Everybody was talking, everybody was asking questions, everybody was loving the oysters, so, so we just kind of kept it rolling and every year it just got bigger and bigger and bigger.

And I think last year we had like 1100 people there and went through like 10,000 oysters or something like that. So people like it.

Dalia: I, I would say so. Okay. When [00:05:00] is it? Where is it? And most importantly, what are some of the standout oyster preparations that will be featured at the festival?

Bill: Absolutely. So, uh, the event is gonna be Saturday, January 10th, uh, from one to five.

And it's at Tabella's, which is, uh, over past like the, the, the Port of Tampa. Um, it's a great venue. It's got, you know, covered areas, which are really, you know, good, you know, in Florida to get outta the sun and everything. And it gives us a, a place to kind of, uh, set everything up. We're gonna have a, I think, five different preparations of oysters.

So we're gonna have, obviously raw oysters that they'll be shucking. Um, we're gonna have steamed oysters, which are, which we do on, uh, an open pit, you know, fire, uh, and we steam 'em. Put 'em out in buckets. Everybody can shuck 'em and, uh, dress 'em themselves. We're gonna have grilled oysters, the b and d grilled oysters, which are a delicacy, and everybody has, you know, that's [00:06:00] usually a line for those.

Last year we added fried oyster Po Boys, which were amazing. On top of that, we have Mark Dandy, who's part of b and d, is in charge of the low country boil, and he is a, a master at, you know, shrimp, sausage, onions, you know, corn, all that stuff kind of boiled up with some seasonings and, and then. For those that maybe don't like oysters, right?

I mean, we want everybody to ease into it, but, and we encourage everybody to at least try one. But we do have some of the best barbecue in Tampa. Casey Ellison and his crew comes in and they do all kinds of barbecue preparations. They did last year, they did a barbecue pizza, which was one of the favorite things I had last year that was really good.

And uh, they did pulled pork smoked brisket. You know, the whole work, so, uh, you, you definitely don't leave there hungry, that's for sure.

Dalia: Oh my gosh, I'm full. Just hearing about it, what do you think it is, [00:07:00] what do you think it is about oysters? Because I can like feel the vibe that you're describing with the live music and everybody, you know, gathering around these like piles of oysters.

What do you think it is about oysters that brings people together?

Bill: I think it's, there's a romance to it, right? I think oysters. You know, oysters, coffee, wine, like they have like kind of these varietal properties. When I travel nowadays, like one of the things that I love doing is, is, is making sure that I try different oysters from different regions.

So the Pacific Northwest, the, you know, northeast coast. Um, you know, I, one of my favorite oyster stories, uh, I had traveled to Australia for work and we were in Melbourne and we were at this place that was kind of like right at the basin of this river that ran through the [00:08:00] Australian, you know, some rainforest.

And they had oysters on the menu. And I was like, I'm going to, you know, how are the oysters that I, I asked the guy and he is like, oh. And he just started describing it and he's like, you're gonna, he goes, it has a finish of like a watermelon rind. And I was like, what? And he's like, yeah. He's like, all this vegetation just kind of, you know falls into the river and it feeds the oysters and they just soak it up. And I swear to God, when you ate that oyster, like you had the taste of like getting to that last bite of an, of a, of a watermelon and just, you know, just so herbaceous and so perfect. So like, I love that kind of like difference that you can kind of pick out, uh, between the oysters and we, you know, so we've usually used.

Like we've used West Texas oysters now. We've been sourcing our oysters, uh, for the last couple times up from the, uh, Chesapeake Bay area. So the, the New River, the James River, uh, which are great. We've done Apalachicola, which is the [00:09:00] local Gulf oysters. So, uh, I'm not sure exactly where we're sourcing the oysters this year, but it's gonna be.

It's always, you know, they're always good and they're, they're, each one has this kind of unique characteristic, you know, a little bit maybe briny or a little bit, uh, you know, kind of meatier, but they're always awesome.

Dalia: Hmm. I love how he described it to you before you tasted it so you could, you. Get the full experience.

That's really cool.

Earlier you mentioned that before Oyster Fest you were hosting these oyster parties for, you know, people that you knew. And I love [00:10:00] that idea, especially as the weather is cooler here in Florida, it's a great time to have an outdoor party. So I don't know if, if you can recall any of the things that made the parties a success, but somebody listening is like, man oyster party. I'm putting that on my 2026 bucket list. Do you have any tips?

Bill: Uh, I would always, you know, I always recommend if you, like, if you're new to oysters right? And you're at an oyster roast or something like that, ask the people next to you. Right? I, I think the, the beauty of the oyster roast is, you know, we're just, we're cooking them and we're putting them out, but then once they're out on the table.

Everybody's kind of grabbing and they're opening on themselves and you know, you're helping each other. And what do you put on yours? You know, oh, I like it with butter and lemon, or, I like it with cocktail sauce, or I just shoot it with, you know, raw or, or with Tabasco or something. So everybody's got their own flavor and, and I think that generates curiosity.

It generates conversation. It generates kind of fellowship and, you know, that's what, that's what it's [00:11:00] all about.

Dalia: For sure. So how do you like your oysters and what do you like to eat them with?

Bill: I am a purist, so I like, I like raw with just a little lemon. But, um, if they're steamed, there's nothing better than like butter and you know, like a butter, like warm butter on, on a steamed oyster.

I mean, it's, it's amazing. Oh, there was, uh, when I lived in Charlotte, North Carolina for a while, there was a place, uh, right on South Boulevard called, uh. Vinnie's Sardine Shack. I don't even know if it's there anymore, but they used to sell buckets of raw oysters, which is really, you know, why we use the buckets to get 'em out to everybody.

'cause you know, you get that bucket and you dump it out and it's just like, oh man, this is heaven. It's right in front of me. And uh uh, it's like Christmas. I used to go through those every weekend.

Dalia: Oh my gosh. Okay. I told people on social media that I would be talking to you and they had a couple of questions about oysters, including, and I think I know what your answer will be, but are [00:12:00] oysters safe to eat these days? And what questions should we be asking maybe in a restaurant before order ordering oysters? That's a tongue twister.

Bill: Yeah, I think I, I mean oysters. Are, are always safe to eat. I mean, with anything, I think you want to be careful and cautious and, and use your senses, right?

If it doesn't smell right, taste right, you know, don't eat it. But, uh, but generally, you know, the, the harvesters are really good about maintaining quality. You know, I think. The Apalachicola oysters, the recent that we've done a lot of oysters out of West Texas and out of the Chesapeake recently is because of some of the things that have, uh, happened in the Gulf.

And, and there was, you know, they basically put a moratorium on Apalachicola oysters for a little bit. So we source them from other places and, and we make sure that we've, you know, we've been dealing with our sources locally for a while, and we got a good rapport with those guys. So, [00:13:00] uh, we make sure that we, you know, we're getting the oysters like less than, I think it's three days after they're pulled from the water.

Uh, but yeah, I would just make sure, trust your senses, uh, you know, but, uh, generally oysters are safe.

Dalia: Great. Another question was about the sustainability of oysters. And I know you're not mm-hmm. An environmental scientist, but, um, someone actually sent me an article from slate.com that makes a case that oysters are ethically okay for vegans to eat.

You know, if people...

Bill: I saw that. I read that.

Dalia: Yeah. Is that wild? So if people have. Environmental concerns about whether or not they should be eating oysters? What would you say to them?

Bill: I, I mean, I think oysters are a, a great indicator of the health of the ecosystem, you know, of where they are. I think, you know, one of the things that, that I really, you know, hope for, for the Tampa area [00:14:00] is that we kind of embrace and help, you know, kind of grow.

The oyster populations in the bay and, and around the area. If you go back, uh, and look at some of the old articles, Tampa Bay, the Tampa Bay area was. Had at one point like the world's best oysters. And I think the bridges and the things that they did, maybe with the waterways back in the day, you know, kind of cut off the water flow and, and subsequently the oyster population died off.

I'd love to see that. And we've been. Talking to a lot of local, uh, farmers, uh, of oysters here in the area and trying to support them as best as we can. But it's tough. I mean, I think, you know, I hope that the, you know, the, the community supports kind of bringing the oyster back, you know, to Tampa Bay.

'cause it would be a wonderful thing, you know, for the region. I think it, it would, you know, it, it inspires, you know, kind of pride in, in kind of the local community. You know, I [00:15:00] spent a lot of time in Charleston. I know. You know, wake and, uh, and Doug and, and Mark, you know, have all enjoyed, you know, the oyster culture up there and it's a big part of the community, right?

So, super sustainable. Uh, I will leave it to the vegans to determine if it lines up with, with their philosophies, but. I encourage everybody to look into it and make their own decisions. They're awesome to eat and, uh, they're fun too, so

Dalia: love it. Okay. Speaking of fun, let's go back to Oyster Fest. What do you see as the future of Oyster Fest?

If your vision comes to life and Tampa does, you know, reign Supreme as like the oyster capital of America or something, what do you envision for the future?

Bill: Oh, I mean, I, you know, Frameworks is such a great charity and I think we're. You know, we're just lucky to be associated with them and we're, we've been super excited to see.

What the, the [00:16:00] funds that we've been able to generate through the Oyster Fest have, have been able to, to do for them. Right. And to see that the, you know, the, the services and, and the offerings that they've been able to provide that they normally wouldn't have been able to. I think, you know, over the seven years that we've been doing it, we've raised quite a bit of money for

them and they've, you know, they've used that to provide scholarships and to, you know, grow their offerings and really help people out.

So, I mean, I look forward to keep doing the Oyster Fest every year and just growing it and, you know, making sure everybody has a good time and, uh, you know, uh, serving as many oysters as we can.

Dalia: That's incredible. Okay. You've mentioned Frameworks a couple times, and I'm gonna be honest, I did not know what Frameworks was when you said you had an Oyster party in the Frameworks parking lot.

I was like, is it a glasses company? What is Frameworks? So can you just tell us a little bit about Yeah. The added benefit of supporting Oyster Fest.

Bill: Yes. So, uh, as, as great it is, as it is [00:17:00] to go to an outdoor party on a Saturday and eat tons of oysters and, uh, a, a friendly environment. It also, the, the money that you, uh, spend to go there is going towards, uh, a charity called Frameworks, which Frameworks is an organization that provides like social and emotional training for kids.

So high school and middle school kids. That need social emotional intelligence training, I think is. It's something I wish I had. I wish they trained, I wish they offer adult classes, but they're helping kids, they're creating bonds. Uh, and it's really been fun to watch how they've grown and how they've expanded, you know, in the area and, you know, not just in the Tampa area, but I think they're growing, you know, outside in the larger kind of region.

And, uh, it's been fun to watch. So I encourage everybody to go, if not to just. Enjoy a ton of oysters to support Frameworks and their cause [00:18:00] because it is awesome and it helps kids and they do a great job.

Dalia: Very cool. So it's a win-win. Yeah. Is there anything else you want us to know about Oyster Fest?

Bill: You know, uh, bring your friends, bring your family.

It's, uh, it's a great time. The music is amazing. The food is amazing. Everybody's happy. And having a good time. And you know, the more people we can get to enjoy it, the better. Uh, it's for a great cause. So, uh, you know, invite your friends, tell your neighbors, go try some oysters, try 'em with different things.

You definitely try the butter and lemon. Definitely try cocktail sauce. You know, try grilled. Try raw. Definitely try steam. That's my favorite. You know, when in doubt go, go find an oyster and enjoy yourselves.

Dalia: Sounds good. Thank you so much for your time. This was fun.

Bill: It was nice meeting you.

Dalia: Okay, bye-bye.

Bill: Bye-bye.

Dalia: Bill Murphy is one of the organizers of Tampa Oyster Festival, which takes place on [00:19:00] January 10th, and it benefits a great cause Frameworks of Tampa Bay. Now I know you're hungry after hearing this conversation, so hit up the show notes of this episode or our website. thezestpodcast.com for a link to purchase tickets.

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