

# The Zest S13E14

**George:** [00:00:00] We're so used to getting a lemon all the time at the grocery store, but are they coming from California or Florida? They might be coming from, you know, Chile or some place like that.

**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. This week, tips for cooking and baking with citrus.

Get you a friend like George Geary. He's a cookbook author and culinary media personality, so of course he makes the best food and he tells the best stories. Earlier this month, George released his 17th cookbook. It's called *Citrus Illustrated: A Cookbook of 35 Sweet and Savory Recipes*. Born in Southern California, George has lots of helpful tips for us citrus loving Floridians. In this conversation, he discusses how to select the most flavorful [00:01:00] oranges and offers advice for cooking and baking with all parts of the fruit, no waste. Then he spills the tea about his time working as a pastry chef for the Walt Disney Company, including baking countless cheesecakes for the set of the golden girls.

Now, as you'll hear in my voice, I was under the weather during this remote recording, so thank you for being a friend and enjoy. This conversation with George Geary.

**George:** Well, honestly, this is my smallest book I've ever done with only 35 recipes, but they're really jam packed with flavor. My largest book was 650 recipes, which took about two years to do, and when I bought my house in 98, I found out they had torn down all of these citrus farms. And I can't stand that. We keep tearing things down like beautiful old houses and [00:02:00] beautiful pieces of land.

So I thought, let me give back and not far from me is a citrus uh, museum. And the University of Riverside, which is in my county, is all about citrus and grafting and things like that. So that's why I did the book to give back because. I took away by buying this house on the piece of property that had a lot of citrus.

**Dalia:** Wow. Well, we appreciate that. And I should mention, you're in Southern California. We're in Florida, but we do have that citrus connection, which is why I thought it would be great to talk to you. I mean, I'm staring at a

lemon tree in my backyard as we speak, and I feel like I'm not getting the most out of citrus.

All I really do with it is make salad dressing. So what are some of your favorite uses for citrus?

**George:** Lemon for almost anything. Like you said, salad dressings. And then, uh, I like to marinate stuff and I just use lemons a [00:03:00] lot. I don't have any citrus trees on my property here. Lucky you. I have a house in Palm Springs also, and there we're a group of 37 small homes.

Yeah, and the rule is, is anybody's front yard, you're allowed to pick anything. And we have about 20 different types of citrus there, which is really great. But out in Palm Springs, the lemon trees, I thought, you know, this is a different type of lemon. So I researched the lemon out there, and it's a breed of citrus that the skin is very, very thick.

Because I thought these are the thickest lemons I've ever had when I first moved out there because of the sunshine. I know you have a lot of sunshine. I have a lot of sunshine, but I think it's Palm Springs. They have a lot more sunshine.

**Dalia:** Yeah. I think I wanna be your neighbor. So where could we, I want to

**George:** York too.

**Dalia:** Yeah, that would be great. So where might we encounter some of these lesser known varieties of citrus? Because if we're just [00:04:00] shopping at the grocery store, there's maybe one lemon. Two or three types of oranges. Do you have any suggestions for encountering these other types of citrus?

**George:** I say farmer's markets.

We have farmer's markets. We have a Hollywood Farmer's Market on Sunday mornings that you see everything and anything there from movie stars to dominatrix from the night before. I mean it is funny, but I would say farmer's markets and then. A place for history and to also look at some things is a place called, uh, Melissa's Produce and it's online and they have a lot of, they tell you when things are available.

We're so used to getting a lemon all the time at the grocery store, but are they coming from California or Florida? They might be coming from Chile or someplace like that. But the other orange that I think is great is, uh, [00:05:00]

Seville oranges that we don't really get. And those come from Spain and those who make the jams and jellies because they're so tart.

**Dalia:** Ooh, that does sound good. And along the same lines of finding in season produce, do you have any tips for selecting, especially oranges? 'cause I feel like oranges are so hit or miss.

**George:** Yeah. Oranges, even if they're yellow on the outside, could be ready to go because we are so used to fruit looking perfect. I say farmer's markets are a hundred percent best place because when you go, you aren't gonna see an apple in the middle of April, the farmer's market, and you aren't gonna see an orange in the middle of, uh, November.

Have you ever seen a lime finger?

**Dalia:** I don't know. What is that?

**George:** Okay. It's about an inch to two inches. They're very strange looking. You cut open and it looks like caviar, white little dots.

**Dalia:** Oh yes.

**George:** And you can pull it out with like a toothpick [00:06:00] and put it on top of a martini. Or you can put it on top of something else like a uh, um, I put it on top of ceviche 'cause it makes it glisten.

And when you bite into it, it's like each little round dot, which a pearl, almost like when you go to a boba drink almost, and it shoots this lime flavor. And those are only about for about six weeks. And you really have to look it up when those are available. But when I was doing the book, I only had about eight months to do it and I really had to watch which produce was coming in.

And of course the publisher. Looks at it and thinks, oh, you can get an orange anytime. It's just a book about orange. But they don't realize we have these specialty items that we are trying to talk about.

**Dalia:** Absolutely. Okay. Speaking of the book, it is literally Citrus Illustrated with these gorgeous illustrations of fruit by Rebecca Hollingsworth.

So can you describe [00:07:00] what those illustrations look like and why you decided to use an illustrator instead of a photographer?

**George:** Well. That's always the publisher's job. They deal with who they are and I still haven't met her. In fact, I tried to befriend her on Instagram and she still hasn't befriended me. I thanked her for, uh, what a gorgeous book it is.

And um, I was over at Chronicle, the book publisher that did it there in San Francisco and I thought, uh, I'd get to meet her, but she doesn't work. She works at home. Um. She's not this a quiet person. I've seen other work at her, but it, I love the, the illustrations at first when they told me, we won't be doing photography, but we need you to take a picture of each dish.

And so after I would make it, I would do, because I've done food photography before and food styling part of my life of, of jobs, and I thought, okay, I'll do it. And I did it. And I sent the [00:08:00] pictures over and then she would send back the sketch drawings and I would say if I liked it or not, or if I thought this should have this or, or, I liked the one with the, um, finger lines, with the little pearls.

I said, you can't see them very well, and I know it's hard in the picture, so I did a closeup. So she and she re read the that, but I mean, it's a small, cute little book. You know, if I was visiting someone, if I was in. California or you know, or, or Florida, uh, visiting somebody, I'd pick this book up with some oranges and take them to them as a gift.

**Dalia:** Yeah, it's a great gift for if you're visiting someone, it's a great maybe hostess gift to bring. And I think the illustrations for me, they help me to see the citrus in a new light because in Florida we are surrounded by citrus, but. Like I said earlier, sometimes we don't know what to do with it, and so seeing them as works of art helps me to kind of reimagine what I can do with them, and you do such a great job of [00:09:00] that in the book.

I mean, some of the recipes are mojito tea cake with rum glaze blood, orange glazed carrots, pink grapefruit and tomato salsa, and you've got martinis and scallops and all kinds of fun recipes. There's a pineapple chutney in the book with kumquats. I also appreciate that you give us know-how on using all the parts of the fruit from the zest to the peel.

We love the zest, the juice, and even the oils. So I know a lot of us maybe just use the juice and throw away the rest, but talk us through how we can use each part of the fruit,

**George:** like that mojito cake. I was in London and I walked by kind of like a deli, and so I see this beautiful, beautiful cake. And it was called a mojito cake.

And it was a pound cake and thought, well, I know what's in the mojito. I can make my pound cake and turn it into a mojito cake, and it would be limes and it would look beautiful as a loaf cake [00:10:00] upside down with a glaze. And the glaze is rum glaze. And I did a kind of a soaked cake after it's made that I pour on top.

And then this white glaze. And then the citrus on top with the peel. And I thought, well, you know, I think I'll do that white on top. Even though you've got the three or four rings of citrus, it still needs some zest. So I took and zested that on top, so I would get that look by itself. Lime zest tastes horrible, but you got that sugary sweetness it, it's pretty good.

So I've used it in so many different ways and also. Whenever you put it into a pound cake, it does these speckles that are beautiful. So that's how you use it in different ways. The zest, you've got, uh, you slice it up and, um, the kumquats that, uh, I did a morning show in Oakland the other day, [00:11:00] and they were like, what do you use kumquats for?

Well, a lot of people have never sliced a kumquat because that is the only citrus that you can put the whole thing in your mouth.

**Dalia:** Yes.

**George:** So Zest, everything. Pop it in your mouth.

**Dalia:** Yeah,

**George:** they're a burst of flavor.

**Dalia:** Yeah, we actually have a kumquat festival here in Florida, so we love a kumquat.

**George:** Well, there you go.

When I, when I, it was funny 'cause when I was growing up we had a kumquat tree and we used to use 'em to throw at the neighbors. 'cause I didn't lie. I thought they were ugly.

**Dalia:** No.

**George:** Yeah.[00:12:00]

**Dalia:** Where, where did you grow up?

**George:** In Southern California. Wow. We had one kumquat tree and I just, and I still, I'm sure that house still has the tree there. And we would throw 'em at the, and we would play, you know, like Army and throw 'em. They were our bullets. And so the recipe that you mentioned, they chutney.

I had somebody from one of the media sources cook that and they did a video and I, I threw it on. My Instagram is so beautiful that kumquat chutney when it's cooked and putting it over on top of chicken or fish. But I like to take kumquats. And slice them very thin and sugar them to where I've candied them almost like a candy peel.

And it sounds like it takes a long time, but you can do it in an afternoon with, you know, while you're doing other things. Then, uh, you've got them. And when people come over and you've made any type of cocktail and you put [00:13:00] them because they float really beautifully. And the look of a kumquad looks like a little tiny sunshine.

It's just really gorgeous. And people think you're Martha. You know, they look at you and you go, wow. You know what you're doing. But the only problem with doing stuff like that is you don't get invited places because they think that you do it better

**Dalia:** all

the time. Oh no. Well, you are. I feel like you're at that level where people would be nervous to have you over for dinner.

You shared a recipe for grapefruit cake that we will share on our website, the zest podcast.com. A lot of people think they don't like grapefruit because it's bitter, but tell me why this cake works.

**George:** Well, that cake, I've got three recipes in the book that are not originally mine, and I tell people when something's not mine.

When I first started cookbook writing, I felt a hundred percent had to be mine. But then I like to tell other people's stories and that recipe is [00:14:00] famous from the 1930s from the Brown Derby, and I have a book. All on historical restaurants of Hollywood and the Brown Derby is on the cover and it was supposedly a light and diet type of dessert for some of the stars that would come in.

It's not diet, it's got cream cheese frosting. You living in Florida, you can taste that same cake over Walt Disney World at the uh, reenacted Brown Derby. But our original brand derby, we had four here in Southern California, and 1978 was the last year that they were in operation. And that's the other thing with citrus, if you don't care for one of the citruses, let's say you really like orange better than lemon, switch it in the recipe and at 99% will work fine.

**Dalia:** That's a great point. Okay. You mentioned Disney, and I know you worked for the Walt Disney Company. Yeah. So can you tell me about that time I have to ask you about. [00:15:00] Making cheesecakes for Golden Girls. That's iconic right there. So what are some of the shows that you worked on and what did you do on those shows?

**George:** Well, I did, um, a show called Mike and Maddie, and that was ABC morning show. It was like, uh, Regis and Kathy Lee and I was their food segment person. I also did live in la, which was a local show, but it was Disney and I wasn't hired because I was Disney. I, uh, didn't want them to know I'd worked for Disney.

'cause wherever I've worked, I didn't wanna use the word Disney all the time. Now Golden Girls was Disney, but I, they didn't know I'd been the pastry chef at Disney.

**Dalia:** So in Golden Girls, what was the context that required a cheesecake? I've watched a lot of Golden Girls, but I don't remember this episode.

**George:** Well, there was a lot of cheesecakes. So, um, in fact, if you ever buy something golden girls, they'll be sitting around eating a cheesecake. What happened with Golden Girls is I was working not at Disney, I was [00:16:00] working outside at a uh, a bakery and they would come in for prop stuff for Paramount Studios and around Hollywood there's Paramount and there's Warner Brothers.

They're all really close, and this prop guy kept coming in for different things for other shows. The guy came in and he said, we've got this weird show starting up with three old ladies and their gay cook. Okay, and is there any way you could make a wedding cake? And I said, well, yeah, but your budget's really low.

And he said, yeah, Disney did teach me the word no is not in your vocabulary. You could always do something. Oh. And they taught me a lot. I mean, I'm not bitter about Disney. I joke. So I said, okay, I can make it all styrofoam. Do you

need anything edible? And he said. We need this one little piece edible. I said, okay, I can cut it out.

That'll be all. And I said, I can't be on the set. And is it tape or is it film?  
[00:17:00] Because you coloring is different with white, with the lighting, how it bounces off. And he was like, boy, I'm impressed, you know about that. I said, I've been around, what do you need? So I, I did exactly what he needed and he said, it's a pilot, it's not gonna work.

So then about five months later. He came back and he said, okay, they picked it up. Can you make a cake for them to sit around and talk? He goes, but we got rid of the chef and we've got a fourth lady now. It's a mom of, I think is what she, he said, I said, yeah, sure. It doesn't matter how many people, what do you want?

And he says, well, we need seven of the same thing. So I made seven chocolate cheesecakes and they're, uh, 10 inch cheesecakes. And no whipped cream. Just very kind of plain that you'd buy at a bakery that weren't too special. And then I started doing all the food, like when mom was stirring pasta sauce. The question's always, does it have to be [00:18:00] edible because you wanna make sure the talent doesn't get sick.

If it doesn't have to be edible, does it have to look homemade or are you really gonna see it? So I'd use that ragu. At that point it was a cost thing, but if mom was chopping up tomatoes. Well, like, I dunno if you remember the episode, um, when Blanche and Rose were selling sandwiches at the construction zone and they were making bacon, lettuce, and potato sandwiches.

So they said, okay, we need these to look really homemade, but we need a slice of potato. So you really see it. So you really have to get into detail with what the food is gonna be. So that's kind of what happened with, uh, golden Girls.

**Dalia:** I think you need to just like get a cheesecake, go to a villa, relax. It sounds like you've earned it.

Thank you so much for your time. Thank you for putting up with my lack of a voice. I think I'm done talking for today. I am gonna rest my voice, but is there anything else you wanted to mention? [00:19:00]

**George:** Oh, my website, george geary.com and that's about it. You know. Thank you so much. It was such a pleasure.

**Dalia:** George Geary is the author of 17 cookbooks, including *Citrus*. Illustrated, he shared the recipe for that grapefruit cake, and you'll find it on our website, [thezestpodcast.com](http://thezestpodcast.com). 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.