

The Zest Podcast - S6E20

Transcription

[00:00:00] **Ellen Macleish:** Food made with care, elevated preparation, and then served the way you want it. That's a dignified meal, and people who need food and food assistance are not people without dignity.

[00:00:14] **Dalia Colón:** 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.

[00:00:25] The holidays mean food and food waste. Today on our Season Six Finale, we'll meet a mother and son duo who are doing something about it.

[00:00:40] You're about to meet a mother and son who are reducing food waste while also tackling food insecurity in Northern Pinellas County. Ellen and Cameron Macleish are the co-founders of 360 Eats. The nonprofit turns surplus food into meals for the hungry and compost for gardeners. Don't you just love that. Cameron is the executive director while Ellen is the executive. I met up with them at Kitchen 24. It's a commercial kitchen in Oldsmar where they store and prepare the food. In our conversation, Cameron and Ellen explain why food waste happens, what they're doing about it, and how we can all waste less food in our own kitchens.

[00:01:25] **Cameron Macleish:** This whole model's based off of a circular economic system where, you know, resources are continually used and reused and, um, so hence name 360 Eats and it's got four key components to it. The first is our food rescue. So we partner with local grocery stores, food distributors, basically anywhere in the food industry where food waste occurs, which happens to be everywhere.

[00:01:49] Um, and we partner with these, these businesses and receive their surplus food that they don't plan to sell and would otherwise go to waste. We receive it as a donation. So that food that we've then rescued, we weigh, we sort, we process, we figure out what we're going to keep. So things like, um, Ingredients, things that we can cook with will prioritize keeping, um, things like prepared meals, um, we won't necessarily be able to use within our meal services.

[00:02:15] We can't really break down a prepared meal and then serve it. So, uh, we're partner with other food pantries and agencies in the areas where we will reroute that good food that we may not necessarily be able to use, but they can. So we ensure that no food goes to waste at any point throughout the whole process.

[00:02:31] Um, so once the food is prepared, uh, meals are, are packaged in composable containers and then we go directly out into the community with our food truck and we serve those meals directly to those who are facing food insecurity in our community. Um, and the whole point of that project, the food truck, is to improve access to nutritious foods.

[00:02:50] Um, a big problem that we kind of deal with here in the food insecure communities is people who lack, you know, reliable transportation to get to supplemental food services. So that's the whole idea of the food truck is that we're able to bring that food to them. In an elevated, dignified dining experience via the food truck, and it's all free meals.

[00:03:08] And then the last piece, uh, to the whole 360 degree system is our composting program. So, um, any food scraps that are generated throughout the cooking process or the food rescue process, we then donate to local gardeners who then compost those food scraps and, and turn it into compost, which is then used to grow more food.

[00:03:27] And then the, the cycle continues.

[00:03:29] **Dalia Colón:** Perfect name. Ellen, explain to me how the food truck works. That's a new aspect to the business, right?

[00:03:35] **Ellen Macleish:** That is brand new. We are able to prepare all of the food here in the kitchen, and then we, uh, carry that cold onto the truck. The truck is a fully equipped kitchen. Any food that continues to need to be prepared can be prepared on the truck once we get to a site. Whoever wants a meal comes up to the truck. We have a menu. So the idea as well is to give people who very rarely are given a choice when it comes to their nutrition, the ability to choose to build their own bowl, what they want with, uh, the food.

[00:04:12] So we would generally have. Two, um, bases, maybe a rice and a potato. And then we would have two different kinds of vegetables you could choose from, and then two different proteins and two different sauces. And that way anybody coming up to the truck can say, well, I don't like rice, but I do like potatoes, or I don't want fish, but I'll have that chicken.

[00:04:33] And it's another level to, Cameron mentioned the word dignity. That's very important. The phrase that you are what you eat is something I hold near and dear to my heart. So food made with care, elevated preparation, and then served the way you want it, that's a dignified meal. And people who need food and food assistance are not people without dignity.

[00:04:57] So we, we wanna be able to give them that opportunity.

[00:05:00] **Dalia Colón:** Oh, I love that. So you're cooking the food. And you're cooking basically the ingredients that people can choose and then make their own bowl? Like what does a typical day look like for you In the kitchen?

[00:05:11] **Ellen Macleish:** Hundreds of pounds of potatoes to chop and maybe roast in the oven or mash, um, hundreds of pounds of rice that, uh, we cook up with whatever kind of flavoring that, uh, I have on hand.

[00:05:24] It's like that cooking show where you get the basket and you open it and it's like, what are you gonna make with this? It's gotta be nutritious, it's gotta be flavorful. Go. So that's my weekly.

[00:05:35] **Dalia Colón:** Do you have help?

[00:05:36] **Ellen Macleish:** We, uh, operate on a volunteer basis. So we have, um, through our website the ability to access a volunteer calendar, which has every shift that we need volunteers, extra hands for.

[00:05:50] We're always looking for more . We could always use more hands, especially as we're expanding our meal services with our food trucks. So that's, that's how we do it.

[00:06:02] **Dalia Colón:** Now, um, we're sitting here in this small pantry, full of peanut butter, boxed almond milk, peppers, beans. Why would a store or a restaurant be getting rid of these?

[00:06:16] These are shelf stable foods. You also have a freezer with meat and things, and then a fridge with fresh produce, which is a little more understandable cause this don't last long. But why? Why is there waste like this to begin with?

[00:06:28] **Cameron Macleish:** Uh, it's a question that we've asked ourselves from the very beginning, and, you know, as we've been doing this, we've

become a little more familiar with, you know, the reasons behind why all this food is going to waste.

[00:06:38] I mean, one of the most common things that we see is when packaging is damaged during the transportation process. And I'm not talking about, let's say a can that's dented. I'm talking about maybe the box for, you know, a, a pack of tuna opened up on the side, but all of the cans are still perfectly fine.

[00:06:56] Depending on, you know, what store location it is, policies prevent them from, you know, being able to sell that. I mean, a lot of it as well as, um, things that are approaching or past it's sell by date, which is very much different from an expiration date. I think a lot of people kind of mix that up, which is, it's still perfectly good food.

[00:07:14] That's a lot of like, kind of the, the dry foods things like canned goods and stuff, which, you know, will last a, a good amount of time past their suggested date of use.

[00:07:22] **Ellen Macleish:** Something else I've seen is the need for especially our supermarkets to have a perpetual display of plenty. Sometimes they're just getting rid of one item to put in the new one.

[00:07:36] Um, and to fill that shelf with something new that people might wanna buy. Um, so there's some carelessness that I've observed as well in how we treat our food and what's viable. And I know like a lot of the beautiful produce that we receive in perfectly good packaging, I'm like, did you just get another shipment in?

[00:07:54] Um, and one comment too, I might say, in the industry, I was, I am a professional chef. Um, I've been at the, I opened the Fenway Hotel, I was at Avo at the Epicuren Hotel in Tampa, and I know the standard is when you're receiving food into a restaurant, you can't accept that damaged box because you can't verify what damaged it.

[00:08:14] So a lot of times the food is perfect all the time. I think we get good food. We very rarely get anything that we're like, wow, this couldn't have been sold other than, as you said, the produce, which can be a little more vulnerable, but.

[00:08:26] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. I didn't know you were a professional chef. What are the easiest. Foods to use and what are the hardest, do you ever get a can of sardines and you're like, what the heck are we gonna do with this?

[00:08:39] **Ellen Macleish:** That is my life. What am I gonna do with this? With the sustainable model, it's definitely easiest to look at your starches. And just know that's gonna be a base, whatever that starch is, whether it's quinoa or rice or a potato or a pasta.

[00:08:57] So that's very easy. Protein's very easy. I know what to do with those. The vegetables, again, that's another easy one. You know, just keep cooking them so they don't spoil. Someone will eat them and make 'em taste good. Um, but those wild ingredients are a lot of fun for me too. I, I, You know, cuz who's gonna see that little can of sardines, you know, and what can I do with that? Can I make that into dressing? I mean, you know, whatever you wanna do with it. It's, it's fun.

[00:09:26] **Dalia Colón:** What's the most unusual donation you can recall?

[00:09:30] **Cameron Macleish:** That's a tricky one. We get unusual things every week. Um, this is one of the funniest ones we got, uh, someone donated a jar of dried beans and the name of the beans was, um, what was it called again?

[00:09:45] It was, uh, oh, uh, redneck bubble bath. And it was a picture of a, of a guy in a bathtub with bubbles floating up. I, you can paint the rest of, you know, the picture there. But yeah, that was definitely a bizarre donation that we received.

[00:09:59] **Dalia Colón:** That's amazing. Where do you keep all the food? Because before we started recording, Ellen you mentioned that you have some of the food in your house.

[00:10:09] **Ellen Macleish:** The dry goods. Occasionally we do run out of room here. Um, so that's, uh, some of them do wind up back at my house until we can get them here and yeah.

[00:10:20] **Dalia Colón:** So Cameron, how. Wrap your mind around the fact that there's more food waste than you can even store here, and yet there are hungry people?

[00:10:31] **Cameron Macleish:** It's, um, something. So I kind of started this journey back in 2015. Um, I was traveling and I was exposed to dumpster

diving, um, through a, a community of backpackers there. And it was at that point that the food system was totally flipped on its head for me. Everything that I had grown up, you know, luckily I had my mom, who's always been very conscious with regards to sustainability and, you know, making the most of the food that you have available.

[00:10:57] Um, but it was the first time that I had seen, uh, you know, commercial food waste in, in that kind of capacity. And so for me, it's been something that's been on my mind for, um, a while now. I'm not as shocked as I once was when I first started, but it's something that, you know, every now and then I'll think to, you know, for example, we're partnering with Earth Fair local grocery store.

[00:11:21] Um, and there's days of the week where we just simply can't pick up food. They'll call us and say, Hey, we've got a couple hundred pounds of really high quality food items here. Can you pick up? And, and we just don't have the capacity. So we'll try to, you know, find another organization that can pick up.

[00:11:35] And so I guess in moments like that, I, I, it's kind of like a reminder of like, this is really a serious problem. Um, and it, it, you know, it's proof of a broken food system. Honestly. You have billions of pounds of food going to waste every single year. And yet in America, um, I'm sure these figures have, have gone up since the pandemic, but originally it was one in every eight individuals was considered food insecure.

[00:11:58] That's millions of Americans. And so when you put the two numbers side by side, I mean, if that's not, uh, proof of a broken food system, I don't, I don't really know what is. And so that's kind of where we're at, is, although we're doing this on very much like a local scale where I think everything, everything helps, everything count, and it it, you know, one of the largest areas of food waste is actually at home.

[00:12:21] You know, that's something that we try to do, not only through the work that we do in the community, but also, you know, educating people on social media. You know, giving them different, different tips and tricks of how to be a little bit more zero waste and sustainable in their own kitchens. And so anyways, I feel like I've gone on this tangent.

[00:12:37] **Ellen Macleish:** But on that point, I will share with you that I have had more than once a volunteer who had come and cooked, you know, over a course of time with me, say, you've literally changed how I think about my food preparation at home. They're like, I can hear your voice, Ellen. Every time I

have that, you know, that piece of carrot that I'm about to throw out and think, well, wait, could I continue to use this for food? Is it like they're thinking now at home how to be less wasteful and that's also hugely impactful to the, the problem.

[00:13:11] **Dalia Colón:** Well, I'm glad the two of you brought that up because this is amazing, but not everyone can operate something like this. So what are some takeaways for us at home or maybe a challenge? I mean, going into the holidays, there's a ton of food waste. You end up throwing out the Turkey or the cranberry because you just get sick of eating it.

[00:13:28] Like what a, what a luxury to have that problem. So what, what do you do with that little piece of carrot or other food scraps?

[00:13:35] **Ellen Macleish:** So it starts with the mindset. If you just reset your mind, we're not looking for perfection, progress, not perfection, to be less wasteful. If that's your mindset, it's gonna alter how you shop for your food.

[00:13:50] If you know that five pound bag of carrots will just stick with carrots, for an example, is more than you will ever use, don't buy them. Find the ones that are loose, you know? Or talk to your supermarket manager and say, I wish the food came in smaller proportions, cuz my family will only eat two pounds of carrots.

[00:14:13] The rest will go to waste. So things like that, you can start to change the way you shop so you'll shop less. Wastefully use Google. Use the internet. What can I do with carrots slash recipe. And 8 million ideas will come up of how to throw that raw carrot into the next bottle of salad dressing in the blender.

[00:14:32] Boom, you've got a delicious carrot flavored vinegar. There's so many things you can do with food that I think a lot of people, if you just use, you know, just Google or ask someone, you know, who cooks. I have this stuff, what can I do with it? Also, when I see this a lot at home and I'm, I have been guilty of this in the past, I'm having people over for dinner.

[00:14:52] I wanna impress them. I'm gonna make that that Thai chili dish. So I buy my little Thai chili paste in a jar. I use a teaspoon of it. And then what? So sometimes it's also thinking about just what is the flavor? What is that ingredient going to bring to a dish? And it doesn't have to be Thai anymore.

[00:15:11] Suddenly it's just a little bit of heat. And maybe I want that in my chicken soup this week. It doesn't matter. That's Thai chili paste. I just want a

little heat in my chicken soup, so I'm gonna throw that in and use it. So that's the other thing I think is just to look at what you already have in terms of flavor, texture, what can it bring to any dish outside of some defined culinary purpose.

[00:15:34] And, and then Google. Be creative and have fun with it.

[00:15:37] **Cameron Macleish:** Yeah, and I'll say another thing as well, composting. So, um, if you have access to, you know, if you've got property with a yard or something, the process of composting is incredibly easy. Um, there's a lot of information online of, you know, how to get you started.

[00:15:52] And in the event that you, let's say you live in an apartment, right? And you don't have the space to compost yourself, there's a website called makesoil.org, which, um, I think is pretty active nation wide. It basically is a map and it shows you, uh, composting host sites so people can, you know, sign up and, and turn their, let's say they've got a big yard or something, they can turn their yard into a, a host site so people who have food scraps can log into this, this application.

[00:16:21] Find the nearest composting host site and then go and take their food scraps over to their composting setup and, and let them compost their food scraps. So, uh, you don't have to have the space to necessarily compost. There's, there's resources available for you to, to really make use of those food scraps.

[00:16:38] And I think one thing I wanted to add as well is it's important that people understand why we should reduce food waste apart from it, just, you know, I think most people can get, can understand that it's bad to waste food, but why is it bad to waste food? We know that, uh, food waste is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, right alongside, I believe, roadside emissions.

[00:16:58] This, of course, uh, furthers the global warming effect. Um, so it's, it's imperative that we start to correct our behavior if we want to sustain as, as a species, as a world really. And so I think that people need to start shifting their mindset to, it's one thing to know, oh yeah, it's bad, you know, to waste food.

[00:17:16] But another why is it bad to waste food and to understand the gravity of the situation is that if we don't start correcting our habits now, this will lead to further irreparable damage. So, um, you know, and that, and that's, that's very much important for, for people to understand so.

[00:17:33] **Dalia Colón:** Where had you been traveling when you were backpacking and saw people dumpster diving?

[00:17:38] **Cameron Macleish:** Yeah, I was, um, so I left London. I studied in London and then I was working in some Dell IT job and said, you know, I wanna go see the world. Pretty much in one day, uh, left my job, broke up with my then girlfriend and booked a one way ticket to, to Australia. I know it was a little harsh, but

[00:17:54] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. You were decisive.

[00:17:55] **Cameron Macleish:** I was decisive. I was in that mindset at the time and I, I wanted to see what the world had to offer. Um, and I'm so glad I did because I would not be sitting, you know, with you here today, if it was not because of that. So, but I ended up in Australia. That was my first location and within two weeks, um, I had stumbled on this community of backpackers that were living together in a shared house.

[00:18:18] There was about 30 or so, give or take, and there were always new people coming in and filtering out. But there was always like, you know, a small core group of people that kind of lived there full time. Um, and when I first arrived I was jet lagged, um, not in the mood for conversation. I just wanted to sleep and they invited me in and they gave me a tour of the place and they take me to the kitchen and the kitchen, honestly, it looks something similar to what you're, you're seeing here in front of us just full of all this, you know, gourmet food and I'm saying, wow, these guys got a big, you know, budget for food . They're spending, they're spending hundreds of, of dollars on food every week. And um, they told me, well, actually, we don't spend any money on any of this food.

[00:18:58] This is all good food that we've pulled from local grocery stores dumpsters. And I'm not gonna lie, the first, when I first heard that I was disgusted, I was like, I need to find a hotel.

[00:19:08] **Dalia Colón:** Typical American.

[00:19:09] **Cameron Macleish:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. I was like, this is so gross. These guys are eating, you know, trash. That, that was my, and I think most people, when they hear about it for the first time, they're like, that's what's...

[00:19:18] **Ellen Macleish:** That's mine on that Skype call, I was like eating garbage?

[00:19:21] **Dalia Colón:** My baby is halfway around the world eating garbage.

[00:19:26] **Cameron Macleish:** So it took me a couple weeks, uh, to kind of adjust to their living style. And then eventually they invited me to come on a dumpster diving mission, if you will. And we went out to a local grocery store and opening up that dumpster for the first time was like opening up a treasure chest.

[00:19:41] I could not believe my eyes, I mean, there was, you know, gourmet cheeses and breads and meats. You know, they had timed it so that they knew exactly when they were throwing the food in the dumpster. So it was all still perfectly fresh. And so that inspired me to, to see, you know, how, how far down the rabbit hole could I go?

[00:19:59] Like, how big was this problem? So over the course of about two years, I made it my, my goal to try to source a majority of my food from the good food that grocery stores that turned away. And I was pretty successful in that. Um, I would say probably about. Uh, 60 to 70% of the food that I consumed over the course of those two years was, was from grocery store dumpsters.

[00:20:20] Um, and people always ask me, didn't you get sick or did you get food poisoning? Not once. Um, you know, and I think a lot of that shocks up to the fact like, you learn what to look out for and, you know, bloating of packages, but, uh, when I came back to the US I, I wanted to create a solution. I said, you know, between Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and the US, it was the same story everywhere.

[00:20:40] And I said, okay, this isn't an isolated issue. This is a global issue. And, um, I started doing my research like, what are the impacts of food waste? And I said, okay, well this, this needs to be tackled asap. And so that's why we started 360 Eats was to to be a part of the solution.

[00:20:53] **Dalia Colón:** What a great story. Is there anything else you wanna mention?

[00:20:58] And, and what do you need? Obviously Ellen needs someone to help chop potatoes. What, what do you need to go to the next level?

[00:21:04] **Cameron Macleish:** Um, yeah, so apart from volunteers, um, and I think it's, you know, it's not the most original thing, but it's so true. Funding. We need funding, uh, in order to, to, you know, sustain what we're doing.

[00:21:18] And obviously now that we have a food truck, our, our expenses have increased. And, um, you know, it's imperative that we continue to get, uh, you know, donors and people, um, backing this project because it's, although it's something that my mom and I started ourselves, we always say this, this is a community project.

[00:21:35] This is built by the community. For the community, um, and is meant to serve the community. And so, you know, we really encourage people that when they do contribute, whether it be monetarily or, or as a volunteer, that they are a part of this community project and they are part of the solution. And we really do want to encourage people that, you know, when they donate their money, it's not a just a, Hey, thank you, see you later, kind of thing.

[00:21:55] It's, thank you for your donation. We invite you to come in, check out what we're doing, and, and, you know, potentially get involved as well in other ways so.

[00:22:02] **Dalia Colón:** What do you need in the kitchen? Are you ever like, dang it. If only I had olive oil, I could do X, Y, and Z.

[00:22:09] **Ellen Macleish:** So we have been able to partner with some amazing, um, food sources.

[00:22:15] You know, obviously I'm not shopping for food, but I think you can see that anything I need, I pretty much have access to the whole. I've got nonstick spray. I've got, you know, we don't buy any food.

[00:22:32] **Dalia Colón:** Amazing. Organic peanut butter, cooking wine. I see quinoa. I see pasta.

[00:22:37] **Ellen Macleish:** Vinegar is back here. I've got all kinds of tomato products to make sauces with. We've got lots of a variety of grains. We've got like black barley and quinoa.

[00:22:49] **Dalia Colón:** I see curry paste. All kinds of spices. Lots of spices. How fun. It would be fun to come in here and volunteer and cook with you.

[00:22:55] **Ellen Macleish:** It absolutely is fun. And I will say I have, I have heard from a lot of our volunteers that we do provide not just an opportunity to be of, of use and of real help.

[00:23:05] Like you're not just stepping envelopes, you are literally helping feed people with food that was gonna for the landfill. That's pretty powerful volunteer experience. But we, I think you can see we're pretty relaxed. We think everything should be super enjoyable as well, and inclusive. It's all, you know, you should feel welcome and I think people do when they volunteer with us.

[00:23:27] **Cameron Macleish:** And, and adding to that actually it's, it's an opportunity for people to learn some, some culinary skills and potentially use that, um, in other aspects of life. And a great example of that is we had a volunteer, Emily, uh, who volunteered with us for about six months. She was working in IT. Wasn't satisfied with her, her career choice.

[00:23:46] **Dalia Colón:** That sounds familiar.

[00:23:47] **Cameron Macleish:** Right.

[00:23:48] **Dalia Colón:** She broke up with her boyfriend.

[00:23:49] **Cameron Macleish:** Yeah, right. No, no. Yeah. I may have nudged her a bit. Um, no, but she wasn't happy where she was at and her dream was to become a chef and so, just by volunteering with Ellen in the kitchen, over the course of about six months, she had gained the culinary, uh, skills and experience that she needed to land herself a job as, uh, I believe she's on, she's a line cook now for Roca, which is one of the top restaurants in Tampa. Yeah. Um, and that's something that eventually we want to open up for people in our community who would otherwise have barriers to employment. So giving them, you know, uh, job experience, job training. Potentially at some point, if we get the funding and opportunity for a livable wage, maybe hire some, some of these amazing folk to come on and, and help Ellen, you know, cook and, and it's, that all falls back in that 360 degree.

[00:24:39] It's all. It's full circle, right? You know, giving to the community, bringing the community in, and you know, um, having them be a part of, of the solution while at the same time being able to sustain themselves and their, and their families, so.

[00:24:51] **Ellen Macleish:** And I'm gonna add one more thing to this, um, in that there is also an amazing opportunity for people who are cooks, who are chefs, um, there's no ego in my kitchen. And so if there's a professional chef and I have a few of mine that will come in and help out, I'm like, there's the proteins. Make 'em taste good. Like you would also as a professional cook, be able to come in and have fun, play with all the food, all the ingredients, and also

be of incredible use and service. So it's a way to use those professional skills and your creativity to also be of service.

[00:25:28] **Dalia Colón:** How cool. Thank you guys for all your time. I know you've got potatoes to chop and probably groceries to drop off or pick up. I really appreciate this. This is very inspirational.

[00:25:38] **Ellen Macleish:** Thank you. Appreciate your coming and um, and helping us get our message out there.

[00:25:46] **Dalia Colón:** Ellen Macleish and her son Cameron Macleish are the co-founders of 360 Eats. You can see a photo of their sustainable food truck on our website, the zestpodcast.com. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas. We get help from Chandler Balkcom, Hana Abdel Majid,, John Vargas, and Marc Haze. We're taking off a couple weeks for the holidays, but we'll be back in January with some tasty new episodes for you.

[00:26:13] So until then, have a safe and happy holiday season. And thank you so much for listening. The Zest is a production of WUSF Public Media, and for the final time, copyright 2022.