

The Zest Podcast - S7E8

Transcription

[00:00:00] **Dalia Colón:** I'm Dalia Colón, and this is The Zest. Citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor and Southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. This week, we're living the sweet life with a beverage expert whose job is to come up with sugary concoctions you'll want to guzzle.

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[00:00:19] INTRO: We hope you're thirsty, because this week's guest is Julia Melucci of Monin. The global company creates flavorings for cocktails, mocktails, coffee drinks, milkshakes and more. Julia works at Monin's U.S. headquarters in Clearwater.

[00:00:33] Her official title is beverage innovation manager. But she describes herself as an Oompa-Loompa in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

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[00:00:41] I recently chatted with Julia about how she combines data with her hospitality industry experience to determine which flavor will be the next big thing. She also discussed her participation in the elite bartending group Chilled 100, offered advice for bartenders and shares tips for creating your own signature drink.

[00:01:01] **Julia Melucci:** Monin is like Switzerland. We are not dedicated to one liquor company or one mixer company. We literally use every product and use our flavors with those products to create new things. So we use it in culinary applications, milkshakes, cocktails, cocktails. There are unlimited options.

[00:01:24] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. So can you give me an example of how you would come up with a flavor?

[00:01:28] I know you do everything from coffee, flavorings, alcohol. Where do you even begin that process?

[00:01:35] **Julia Melucci:** It is a team effort. So I'm in innovation, so I basically use the products to create things with our products, right? But to come up with a

new flavor, we all submit ideas. So our innovation team, our marketing team, and our r and d team are heavily involved to work together to create the next big

[00:01:55] **Dalia Colón:** thing.

[00:01:55] What is the next big thing?

[00:01:57] **Julia Melucci:** So I believe the next big thing, we've already announced that our flavor of the year for 2023, which has just started being produced as Hot Honey flavored syrup. It's gonna be a sweet and spicy.

[00:02:08] **Dalia Colón:** Oh my gosh. Okay. So when I think of hot honey, I think maybe I would drizzle it on pizza or something like that.

[00:02:13] But in terms of a drink, what would you use it for?

[00:02:18] **Julia Melucci:** So pizza is actually a really good one for the culinary side of things, but I just made a, it's my new favorite thing, actually. It's, I call it beasting punch. It's pineapple juice and lemonade with hot. Just those three ingredients mixed together and it's like it's sweet and then it leaves a little lingering spice in the back of your throat and you're like, Ooh, what was that?

[00:02:39] It was so good. And then you just keep drinking more of it.

[00:02:43] **Dalia Colón:** Bee Sting Punch. That sounds fun. So how did you figure out that Hot honey was the next big thing? It almost reminds me of Pantone's color of the year.

[00:02:54] **Julia Melucci:** Right. Monin does do a flavor of the year every year, so we just finished, uh, 2022 with passion fruit.

[00:03:00] I think that it's just a combination, like I said, of the marketing team and the research and development scientists, and we look at what trends have been going on in the food and beverage industry, and then we think about what seems like it's on the up and up. There's a lot of research involved. So we're able to look up even things like the related to the panton color of the year.

[00:03:23] Like, oh, where did they use red the most, you know, in our industry, or something like that.

[00:03:28] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. Okay. There's a lot to it. So you are always looking for what's on the up and up, what's, what's trending? I know you said hot honey is the flavor of 2023, but are there other trends you're seeing?

[00:03:41] **Julia Melucci:** Oh, always. Always.

[00:03:42] So if you are gonna go drink specific, people are like, oh, espresso martinis are trending. They are, but they've also never gone out of style. Now they're just like every. Anything you can make into an espresso martini, people are all about it. So I think that comes back to like familiar favorites. There are loads of trend research that we do.

[00:04:01] We're constantly reading magazines, reading articles online. People send us information like within the company, if somebody sees something, they're like, oh my gosh, make sure that innovation saw this. We do a lot of research that way.

[00:04:15] **Dalia Colón:** So when people find out what you do, if I met you at a cocktail party, Are people constantly trying to give you ideas.

[00:04:22] Like people are always trying to give me ideas for this podcast, which, you know, some pan out and some not so much. But do people meet you at a party and say, you know what, celery juice is hot. You totally should do something with

[00:04:32] **Julia Melucci:** that. Sort of, yeah, that happens. Or a lot of like, oh, you should just come and make drinks for me.

[00:04:38] Like, oh, I'll be your taste tester. So yeah, everybody wants to be in my Guinea pig .

[00:04:43] **Dalia Colón:** Oh, I'll totally be your Guinea pig, and we'll get into that right a little later. But first, how did you get into this position? It sounds like a Willy Wonka fantasy.

[00:04:53] **Julia Melucci:** It absolutely is. I actually sometimes refer to myself as an mpa, Lupa here, because that's quite literally what I do.

[00:05:01] I work in a sugar factory and I play with sugar all day long. I'm like, Buddy the Elf.

[00:05:07] **Dalia Colón:** Oh, that's so fun. Um, maybe maple syrup on your spaghetti. . Yeah, on everything. Everything. What did you did study and, and what path led you here?

[00:05:15] **Julia Melucci:** So I, uh, had been in the hospitality industry for. Close to 30 years, I have done a fair amount of public speaking.

[00:05:26] I did a lot of sales with the previous jobs. I taught martial arts for a while. As I progressed further in my career, I was like, you know, I need to get out there more. So I started doing, uh, cocktail contests and writing articles for things or being interviewed for different things like what's the correlation between tequila and Valentine's Day or something.

[00:05:48] And I was featured in Chilled Magazine in October of 2021. I was talking about how, you know, one of my favorite things to do behind the bar when someone was placing a drink order was not necessarily just have them hand them a menu and walk away, but was to have a discussion with them and ask them. , what kinds of flavors do they like?

[00:06:09] What sorts of drinks and food do they like? And then come up with something for them right then, or adapt something from the menu and make it more customized to what they wanted, right? The C E O of Monan. Bill Lombardo, who is our Willy Wonka, he saw the article and he spoke to our VP of innovation and he was like, Hey, do we know this girl?

[00:06:30] Yeah, I don't think we know her. She served us drinks at the bar before, so they started coming in, telling me more and more, and I took a tour and walking into. Amazing facility. It was like stepping into an instructional video or like that, how things are made video, and you're like, wow, look, they have like robots doing plastic wrap and building boxes and there's a machine that like does this big spinny conveyor belt with all the bottles and they're bidding magically filled and labeled, and it was really, really overwhelming and it smelled amazing.

[00:07:06] You get further in and then you have like microscopes and scientists. I'm like, this place really is like the Willy Walka factory. Then we have our test kitchen, which has a full culinary facility and a bar. Any garnish I could think of. If we don't have it, we get it. Any glassware, we have it, you know, and we have all of the liquor.

[00:07:27] It's pretty much a playground. If you enjoy making drinks or food, Everything is at your disposal. So we make drinks, take pictures, do

presentations. There's a lot. There's a lot more than just writing a recipe. It's all fun.

[00:07:43] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. Oh, that does sound fun. Okay, so for those of us who don't get to go to the Willy Wonka factory, do you have any advice for creating, I don't know, a signature cocktail for a wedding or a signature coffee drink for a brunch?

[00:07:58] Something that's doable for the average person?

[00:08:01] **Julia Melucci:** Typically when I'm getting started, I think like, okay, are we focusing? Because some things, like for a wedding, maybe they want it to be a certain color to kind of match their theme, right? I was just at a wedding and they were wearing all, all of them were wearing like this beautiful lavender gowns.

[00:08:18] Then I'd be like, you know what? We should do like a lavender cocktail for that, and then you would like choose your flavor. So I would use like lavender or lavender lemon and think to myself like, Hmm, Jen goes great with laven. , you know, and then just kind of build from there. Or if it's a flavor centric, you know, oh well it's Christmas and I wanna make a special kind of coffee or hot cocoa for my friends and family, what screams Christmas to me?

[00:08:43] How about gingerbread, right or toasted marshmallow? And then go from there.

[00:08:48] **Dalia Colón:** You're so good because I'm like, oh, I don't know. What's cream's Christmas? Cranberry? I don't know.

[00:08:52] **Julia Melucci:** Yeah. Cranberry. Not maybe for coffee per se, but what about like a cranberry and siege refresher?

[00:08:59] **Dalia Colón:** Yeah. And then, okay, we're here in Florida.

[00:09:01] How far out does Monin go? Because I think of, you know, my parents who are in Ohio, they probably don't wanna drink the same thing that I wanna drink. So how does geography affect those trends?

[00:09:13] **Julia Melucci:** We develop for. Everyone year round. So I think that we have something for everyone. Plus our innovators are all over the country as well.

[00:09:24] Yeah. We're actually a, um, a global company, even though our US headquarters is here in Clearwater, we are literally everywhere.

[00:09:33] **Dalia Colón:** Very cool. You talked about being featured in Chilled Magazine, and I know that you're a member of the chilled 100 mm-hmm. . So what is the chilled 100 and what did you learn from being a part of this group?

[00:09:45] **Julia Melucci:** So the child 100 is a group of bartenders from the United States that are, you're sort of like on the panel for the magazine. But it opens you up to specific opportunities. So it's like being in a club, you know? So in this particular club, we'll find out things like new products that are being released to the market or their educational opportunities or competitions.

[00:10:11] For example, I just got back from Louisville, Kentucky. I was invited through Child 100. We have to apply, and they picked 60 people from around the country to come out to Louisville, put us up for a week. We did exclusive tours. I got to go to a Cooperage, which was really cool. I've been on loads of DEC Distillery tours before, but Cooperage is where they actually build like the barrels that.

[00:10:36] The bourbon and whiskey that are being aged, and then learn how much they're repurposed. They're like, they're in use for at least 70 years usually, which I never would've known. I didn't know that either.

[00:11:10] **Dalia Colón:** So what advice do you have for just the average bartender listening who wants to take their craft to the next level?

[00:11:18] **Julia Melucci:** Always experiment. And also that doesn't necessarily mean make a drink and drink the whole thing. Tasting is a lot different than drinking. The ones that are really into the industry are doing more tasting than drinking it seems, cuz you're always trying something new.

[00:11:35] So, and after a little while your palate gets compromised. So I would say focus more on tasting. Also get involved with a group. You know, you've got like your US bartenders. You've got the children hundred. I'm sure there are other groups, but the more that I'm looking all the time, you can become like a certified spirit specialist.

[00:11:53] So the more things you do to build your resume, aside from the things we already do, it's like we learned when we were young. Take your skills and correlate them to what's on your resume, you know? Okay. So bartending,

you're automatically good at, uh, multitasking. Usually you're good at speaking to people.

[00:12:08] So take these skills and just highlight them. So now there are things you can do. To like add onto your resume to just build and.

[00:12:17] **Dalia Colón:** That's great. Okay. You said that experimenting was important and tasting, and speaking of which, your team sent me this ginormous box of samples. There's the cocktail collection, agave, pomegranate, mojito mix, mango and pure cane.

[00:12:35] There's the floral collection, violet, lavender, rose, hibiscus, and elderflower. Coffee collection, caramel. Moretto, hazelnut, Irish cream and vanilla. And then I've got, and by the way, there's so much bubble wrap. My kids are gonna love you. I'm gonna love to pop that. And then there's a container of huckleberry syrup and a container of winter citrus syrup.

[00:13:00] I've got some glasses here, , I've got some mixing spoons here. What is an easy recipe that I could make with one or some of these samples? Well,

[00:13:15] **Julia Melucci:** one of the easiest things you can do if you're just looking for, you know, it's pretty early in the morning for us right now, maybe like a lemonade. So something as simple as taking that huckleberry syrup and adding like three quarters of an ounce to an ounce of it to a glass of lemonade, and all of a sudden you have huckleberry.

[00:13:35] Oh, that's so good. Super elevated and

[00:13:37] **Dalia Colón:** right outside my window I've got a Meyer lemon tree full of lemons. And where? There you go. Yes. Maybe I'll do that later. But what I love about this is it doesn't have to be alcoholic if I don't want it to be, because my first thought was, oh my gosh, my kids are gonna see these boxes and they're gonna wanna try stuff.

[00:13:53] And I'm gonna have to say no cuz it's alcoholic. But it doesn't have to be. Are you finding that more people are interested in cocktails versus cocktails? I

[00:14:00] **Julia Melucci:** would say that's something that is very on trend right now. Uh, like the low A B V or the no, A B V. There's this whole other culture happening of zero proof spirits now, so we are getting more requests for recipes like that.

[00:14:16] It's pretty fun because for pretty much any mocktail, you can make a spirit adoption. So it's like those old commercials where you're like, just add water. But no, it's like, just add vodka. I don't know.

[00:14:28] **Dalia Colón:** fun. Everyone can participate. Yeah. So you've been here in the Tampa Bay area for decades. Are you originally from Oh yeah.

[00:14:35] **Julia Melucci:** Um, no, I'm originally from Atlanta, but uh, my family moved here. I would say I got here, like almost all of the other non-native Floridians, grandma moved down to Florida and then the family came to visit, and then everyone was like, well, It's pretty darn nice here. I think we should live closer to her. And then my whole family trickled down and I've been here almost 40 years since.

[00:14:58] **Dalia Colón:** Oh, amazing. The chain migration. I'm still trying to get my family on board with that. So what's your overall impression of Florida's mixology scene compared to other places you've traveled?

[00:15:11] **Julia Melucci:** Um, I'd say we have a lot to offer here because we've got. You know, you have your bigger hotspots. Miami, um, Orlando has a lot of food and drink.

[00:15:21] Jacksonville, I was surprised, um, has a lot as well. And then Tampa we're like, I feel like we're on the up and up. We're coming up. But we have also a lot of more beachy stuff that you're not getting everywhere else. You know, you go to other places and they're like, what's a ru runner? I'm like, what do you mean?

[00:15:37] What's a rum runner? That's like the official state drink in Florida. So, yeah, I think we're, we're pretty on with the tiki trends, but you'll see, uh, there are more craft style bars popping up a around here. Is

[00:15:51] **Dalia Colón:** there a flavor in all of your mixology and, and Willy Wonka experience, is there a flavor that you just couldn't get to work?

[00:16:02] **Julia Melucci:** Um, No, not yet. Not yet.

[00:16:06] **Dalia Colón:** Wow. I love that answer. I love that answer. And you're always, and you're always looking to innovate. I know. When I spoke to you last week briefly, you mentioned that you had some beehives outside of your window. So can you tell me about that?

[00:16:20] **Julia Melucci:** Yep. So we are, um, partnering, Monan is partnered with, it's a company called Be Downtown.

[00:16:28] It was this girl, Audrey started this business. She was trying to set up a apiaries, I believe, in the city where she was living. Urban beekeeping, I believe is how she referred to it. And I think she said she's a fourth generation beekeeper. One day she was out tending to her bees in some other part of Florida and they were producing this like bright red substance in their hives.

[00:16:55] And it wasn't honey, but it was. Bright red, and she was like, what the heck? So it was this mystery, and then they found out it was because those bees, during the like non blooming season for the flowers that they normally fed on, they were eating monan syrup. Like, oh. So Monan has partnered. For years with, uh, local beekeepers and farmers, they take our syrup and like recycle it as food so that the bees can keep pollinating and keep their population going.

[00:17:25] So when she found out it was the monan syrup making their, uh, You know, they're product red, they all, everybody got in touch. And then now we actually have an A apiary here on site. So now we'll be able to feed them, but also they will make honey that we'll be able to use here for certain things as well.

[00:17:47] Wow. Full circle. Yeah, it's really neat. It's really neat.

[00:17:52] **Dalia Colón:** Everyone, literally, everyone is drinking your product whether you or not. Okay? Well, I could talk to you all day, but before I let you go, a lot of people were staying home during the pandemic, and some people have. Sort of returned to bars and restaurants, but then other people discovered, you know what, I'm an indoor cat and I don't really wanna go back out.

[00:18:11] So have you seen a difference in the way that people drink, whether it's alcohol or coffee, or tea or lemonade, when they're at home versus when they're out?

[00:18:20] **Julia Melucci:** Hmm. I feel like when I go out, I am looking for something more of like, um, a special or unique experience. Although yes, I can totally do that at home.

[00:18:33] Do I want to go through the work and the cleanup process and all of that? So I think at home people, Are typically a little more simplistic with, you know, what they're drinking, coffee, tea. I mean, that's why the flavored coffee creamers are huge, right? Monin actually created during quarantine a line of

home crafted mixers, like a dragonfruit, cosmo, and literally just add ice and vodka.

[00:19:00] And now, poof. You have, you know, an elevated cocktail experience that you didn't have to work.

[00:19:07] **Dalia Colón:** I love that. Okay, last question. What's your go-to order when you go out? Or are you just so sick of drinks that you just don't even want anything?

[00:19:14] **Julia Melucci:** I'm never sick of drinks. I always want something. I usually have three at my desk.

[00:19:18] Not always alcoholic. Actually. Never at the desk.

[00:19:21] **Dalia Colón:** You're the Don Draper. You can actually get away with it though. , that's pretty, no,

[00:19:25] **Julia Melucci:** no, no, no. Yeah, I taste but not drink at work. Right. Of water. I have usually a water or coffee and a tea here at the desk. But when I go out, if I. Can't think of anything immediately.

[00:19:37] I'm either, uh, Prosecco or champagne or like a cucumber vodka and soda kind of girl. Otherwise, what I like to do is, uh, read cocktail menus and order something that I haven't had yet. Like everywhere I go, I don't know. Even when my friends go on vacations, they send me pictures of cocktail menus because I, I just enjoy reading them.

[00:19:59] I'm like, oh, that's a great idea. Oh, I like to imagine what it tastes.

[00:20:05] **Dalia Colón:** Well, I can't believe there's something you haven't had yet. Thank you so much. This was really fun and interesting and I, I can't wait to, to play with some flavors and maybe make some lemonade later. Well, Julia, thank you so much. This was a treat.

[00:20:18] **Julia Melucci:** My pleasure.

[00:20:19] **Dalia Colón:** Julia Melucci is beverage innovation manager for Monin. If this conversation made you thirsty, then head to our website to find Monin's recipes for Hot Honey Lemonade and Bee Sting Punch. They're at thezestpodcast.com. I'm Dalia Colón. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas.

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