

The Zest S7 E7

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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. Is there anything more comforting than a bowl of fresh pasta? Today we'll meet two brothers who are helping people cook restaurant-quality pasta ready anytime they want, at home.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while the rest of us were experimenting with [sourdough starter](#), the Bryon brothers were eating like kings.

With restaurants shuttered, Nic Bryon had been laid off from his job as sous chef of Tampa's [Oak & Ola](#). But the Johnson & Wales grad put his culinary skills to work at home, where he quarantined with his brother Greg and Greg's young family.

The food, wine and music flowed. But the money didn't. So in April 2020, the brothers combined Nic's cooking expertise with Greg's business acumen to start [Pasta Packs](#).

Today Pasta Packs has a brick-and-mortar pickup [location](#) in South Tampa. In addition to selling ready-to-cook pastas and sauces, Pasta Packs offers classes, catering and in-home three-course dinners. Nic also teaches a free cooking class for kids called [The Sauce](#), through University Area Community Development Corporation in Tampa.

Greg and Nic recently chatted with me about the [challenges](#) they faced along the way, tips for making better pasta at home and the reaction they receive as two Black men cooking Italian food.

Greg Bryon: So pasta pack started, is it almost two and a half years now?

Nic Bryon: Two and a half, almost three years. Yeah. March. March, actually, April 7th will officially be the first day we started taking orders. So,

Dalia Colón: Wow. Okay. Greg, how did this get started? What was the impetus?

Greg Bryon: So, it's Covid, you know, at the time Nick was, uh, he had worked all the way up, uh, to being the sous chef at a pretty cool restaurant here in town, Oak and Ola.

He was the sous chef there and everything was honky dory. He was good. He was working those long kitchen hours and. Covid rolled around and changed the landscape for hospitality. I mean, still up until this point, you know, essentially, essentially, um, Nick was laid off. You know, everything was shut down.

We were kind of quarantining, uh, me, him, my wife, and at the time my newborn, other newborn. We're quarantining at the house and you know, he's cooking all kinds of like amazing dishes and lobster and then ravioli and just kind of, you know, going crazy in a creative space. And then reality set in of like, oh man, like how are we gonna pay the bills?

You know what I mean? Like, it was kind of cool to have a week off and then not so cool. So, you know, we just, you know, my, my day-to-day is in, in business. I also operated a design agency here in town. Um, and I, we just put our heads together, man. We were like, man, how the food was so good that we were eating.

It was just kind of like, how can, how can, you know, how can Nick still serve people food and kind of have this hospitality experience through quarantine, through Covid. Um, and we, we came up with pasta packs. It just kind of made sense for some of the rules that we set. Um, We made about 10 kits, you know, and the kits come with the fresh pasta sauce and a protein.

He made like 10, an early version of a kit. Dropped it off on a couple of friend's porches, text them some cooking instructions, and just. Saw what happened and that's, that's kinda how it started.

Dalia Colón: Wow. I feel like I did quarantine wrong because I didn't have a chef in my pod . That would've been very useful.

Okay, Nick, first of all, we love Oak and Ola. We've had Chef Ann Kearney, a James Beard Award winner, I believe, we've had her on the podcast. Um, I asked my husband to take me there for my birthday a couple years ago, , so love that restaurant. So you must be an amazing chef. Now why pasta Nick? Because. You could have done kits with other types of food, but why was pasta a good fit?

Nic Bryon: We wanted to come up with, uh, the best thing that everybody can kind of execute at home was whether it's the freshest ingredients, the fresh pasta, the fresh sauce, and we wanted to make it easy. Uh, so it's not like, it's not similar to like Uber Eats where you have to order your food. You have to wait a few minutes and your food can kind of get cold.

The idea with the pasta is you can boil it fresh, heat up the sauce, and have everything. Hot and fresh as if you would, uh, go out to a restaurant and eat.

Dalia Colón: Fresh pasta feels so luxurious, but to make it yourself Yeah. Is the biggest pain. No, this is amazing. Okay, Greg, you talked about rules that you all had set for yourself? What do you mean?

Greg Bryon: Yeah, Nick, you know, Nick touched on those a little bit. You know, we wanted, we didn't want this to have to be like a three hour ordeal in the kitchen where you have to have this knife and this particular pen and, and you know, every little gizmo and gadget that makes cooking a little easier in the kitchen at home.

You know, we wanted this to be quick, you know, almost, you know, like Nick said, like, man, I can just order some food, get this, and then like 10 minutes. I'm eating something that's really, really amazing in terms of like flavor and depth and easy, right? So these were some of the rules that was like, okay, you can't, you don't have to prep.

You don't have to be a chef in the kitchen. You don't even have to cook at all. All you needed to do no was how to boil water. Essentially, the sauce was cooked, the protein was cooked, the noodles were fresh, right? Which means they only boil for two minutes. That these were the rules, right? Like, and like Nick was saying, we didn't want you to have to like order something and then you have to like figure out how the best way to reheat it when you get home and you dry it up or you microwave it to death or, or you know, as for pasta, you want to eat it as swim as it hits the plate, right? That's that. You know, that was the greatest experience I think with us quarantining as Nick is cooking. Like for the first couple of days you weren't even sitting down as, as soon as it came out the pan we're just eating it in the kitchen, you know, a glass of wine and just, you know, blasting music.

I think that era was some of the greatest. You know, DJ has produced some of the greatest quarantine mixes ever. , the quarantine era. , yeah. In my lifetime. So we would have on our favorite dj and he was just in the kitchen, just creating

and going crazy. So like that experience with pasta, you know, you don't want it to cool down.

You don't want the cheese to solidify so, So keep it short. Those were some of the, the rules that we created. Like, man, this had to be quick. It had to be easy. Uh, and you didn't have to be super skilled in the kitchen. You know, we had early customers that, you know, would hit us up and be like, man, you know, it's our, it's, it's my wife's anniversary, or it's my mom's 80th birthday and we can't really go anywhere.

Like, I don't know how to cook. We are not really a cooking family, like, and these kids came in. Perfect for stuff like that. Yeah, like perfect.

Dalia Colón: Oh, that's so good. And honestly, I'm kind of a homebody anyway, so quarantine or not, I'd rather just eat a nice meal at home. Okay. Gotta ask who are the DJs that you're spinning so we can really recreate the vibe

Greg Bryon: Oh man. We definitely, definitely, I think the number one mix that we had on, what was it, Nick?

Nic Bryon: It was Action Bronson's live from the moon. Yeah, that's, Those early days of making the pasta packs and coming up with the recipes that, that, that vibe helped fuel the flavors for those dishes. And even now when we go back and put it back on, oh man, it just takes us back to a quarantine time where we're just cooking and creating.

Dalia Colón: Wow. What was it again? Tell me the name. It's Live from the moon. Live from the moon. Isn't that crazy that we are nostalgic for quarantine? It was. It was the worst of times. It was the worst of times. Okay. Nick, we gotta talk about the recipes. What were some of those early kits that set you all off on this journey?

Nic Bryon: So a lot of those kids, we still have available for pickup, um, in the store. But the very first one we came up with was the, uh, Oli. It's. Olive oil based sauce. Um, you have your olive oil, your Italian parsley, your lemon juice, a little bit of lemon zest, a touch of crushed red pepper, some shaved garlic. Um, and then that has the option of coming with a red Argentine shrimp as well.

Um, and another one we came up with was the, so it's like a creamy, lemon based sauce with a little bit of, uh, lemon zest. So you get a [00:07:00] light pop, uh, of lemon when you're in there. And that comes with shrimp as well.

Um, then we had was a spaghetti and meat. First set of spaghetti and meatballs, um, with a vegetable like goose sauce.

And then we created a, uh, our plant-based. So we had a lot of people with dietary restrictions. Mm-hmm. , whether they're plant-based or vegetarian. We had a couple close friends, they reached out. I'm like, man, we see what you're doing. Looks amazing, but where's the plant-based pasta? So that put me back in the kitchen to create, uh, a baseline spinach fettuccini with a walnut pesto that's completely plant-based. And even up till today our, our plant-based friends still go crazy to that one.

Dalia Colón: I would go crazy for that one. I'm one of those, I'm one of those plant-based friends. Okay. Greg, you started the business, as you said during the pandemic, and you two were even featured in a Wall Street Journal article, and the title of the article was, "Is it insane to start a business during coronavirus? Millions of Americans don't think so." So what were the ups and downs of that and how has the business changed since we're coming out of the pandemic?

Greg Bryon: Man, the ups and downs. Oh God. At the time I felt like for us it was all ups. You know? I mean, the downs, you know, Nick was laid off, you know, that was, that was definitely like a, a mental recalibration for everyone.

And like the uncertainty, there was plenty of downs. I, I, you know, I lost friends during covid. There are plenty of downs, but, you know, within, within. You know, creative bubble. It was nothing but us. It was all positive. It was all creation. You know, like those articles, I wouldn't even imagine that we would've been in a Wall Street Journal article and, and.

That we would be where we are today. I, you know, I, I think it caught us off guard. You know, it was, it was a, a very quick, it was well thought out, but it was a very quick creative idea and it just, it just skyrocketed. And once that article came out from the Wall Street Journal, I mean, we probably did an interview, we probably did three to four interviews a week for like six or seven.

Unbelievable. You know, it was, it was, it was incredible. You know, I, you know, to see, to see kind of like where we've come now, like at some point in reality had to set in, but every day was just a surprise. You know? I mean, when we, those first kits that Nick was talking about, like we just had an Instagram, right?

It got to the point where, I mean, we'd spent four or five hours on Instagram. Just answering questions and ingredients. And then, you know, I sat down one

day and was like, oh. We both sat down and was like, man, okay, we need to pause Instagram and make a website. We need like e-commerce, we need like proper q and a, uh, uh, I'm sorry.

Uh, frequently asked questions. We need, we need as much as that, as, as humanly possible. Hold on, I'm sorry. We need as [00:10:00] much as that as possible to streamline this. I can't answer DMs for, uh, 45 or, you know, for three, four hours a day. Like it, it was crazy.

Dalia Colón: Unbelievable. Okay. And Nick, what does the business look like today? You have a brick and mortar location?

Nic Bryon: Yes, we're in South Tampa. Um, in between Elin and Gandy we've got a, a storefront location. Um, and like I said, even during this holiday time, things have been insanely busy. Like, I'll get here at like this morning, I got here about 6 37 and we're getting ready to start rolling out pasta.

I did this yesterday and as I'm rolling out the pasta, people are just naturally walking in, Hey, can I buy that pasta off the rack? And it, people want the fresh pasta to go with their, uh, uh, Italian sauces that they're their mothers and grandmothers talk to them. It's been great. It's been great. I had to close the store extra early and a little early yesterday because we're running outta stuff and people are just, people are just coming in ways.

Greg Bryon: It's, it's nuts. Yeah. We sold out a pasta yesterday, essentially. Yeah.

Dalia Colón: Wow. Okay. And I should mention, we're recording this two days before Christmas, which is, yep. Very generous of you guys with your time. And I could totally see why people wouldn't have the capacity to make something from scratch because they're busy getting Christmas dinner and Hanukkah dinner and all that good stuff.

So Nick, Greg said, it's been all ups, but I'm thinking during the pandemic, everyone was eating at home and now people are going out again. So was there any slowdown or it's just all gas, no breaks?

Nic Bryon: I mean, there's, we, we, we definitely, uh, saw the change actually this year with people going out more. I feel like this summer with us being in our first, uh, summer in, in our own brick and mortar place, we got to see, um, people from the pandemic go out and travel.

So we felt it a little bit, but we definitely try to stay creative with dropping specials and, and keeping people in tree. Um, we do a lot of in-home private dinners as well too. So that has definitely [00:12:00] been keeping, keeping us

Dalia Colón: busy as well. Tell me more about those. Is it a pasta making class? Is it a catered dinner?

Nic Bryon: So in the space we do private dinners, we do pasta classes, kind of anything. We have a flexible space, so anything the guest is really looking for, we could kind of help them, um, achieve. But if, like you said, we got a lot of homebody, uh, uh, folks who, who don't like to leave the house or they just wanna have their friends over, um, to kind of have a, a, a great meal, but still be in the, in the comfortable space of their home.

And that's where we step in and we'll come with a three course menu. Kind of helped them execute a, uh, what was it, last week we did a birthday party. I think she turned 65. She didn't wanna leave the house. She wanted to invite her friends over and have like her own little bar. So that's where we came in with a three-quarters menu.

And she loved it. What was the menu? Uh, so they had three appetizers. They had crab cakes, they had, uh, mushroom flatbread, like a truffle ricotta. And then they had, uh, armini with a roasted red pepper, ai. The first course they wanted the allo with shrimp. Second course was a Caesar salad. Um, third course was a paned brazini with brown butter, broccoli, and a uh, tomato cavelli.

And then for dessert, they had a stone fruit trio with an vanilla and caramel ly.

Dalia Colón: Oh my gosh. You guys must have gained so much weight during the pandemic, having a chef live with you.

Nic Bryon: No. We had our morning bike rides where we would wake up and ride about 20 miles, so we, yeah. As much as we ate, we worked it off too.

Dalia Colón: That's perfect. Okay. Now people are hearing this. A lot of our listeners live in Tampa Bay, but a lot of 'em don't. A lot of 'em don't even live in Florida, so how far do you deliver if they can't make it to your store in South Tampa, or do you no longer deliver?

Greg Bryon: So we that, that's one of the changes that kind of happened once we, uh, we opened up our store, you know, before we had the store, we had like a pickup location, I guess you could say.

We were a ghost kitchen at the time. Um, so we kind of had like a pickup location and we would deliver, I think we would deliver from, what was it, four until about six. Yeah. You know, which was also interesting, you know, to jump back to pandemic, which was also interesting, delivering from four to six because it was absolutely no one on the road.

We didn't have rush hour for like rush hour, almost two years. There was no rush hour or something like that. So we could, we could at four o'clock hop in the car with, I dunno, 20 orders and drive around. We would meet people in st. I mean, we drove around all over the place. We drove around for like a few hours, sometimes even have to go past our six o'clock, you know, deadline because it was impossible to deliver 20 orders.

And based on where they were in Tampa, you know, Nick would be in the kitchen like, you know, making pasta and, and going crazy. [00:15:00] and I would be sitting down, like trying to calculate a map and figure out like which way we need to go first. And like just trying to like figure out like what we got ourselves into, like, you know, so that, that was one of the changes.

We opened up our storefront and said, okay, we're still super small. It's just us. You know, we didn't, we didn't really feel the need to do delivery. Let's bring people to us. Let them see the space, let them kind of like experience our vibe. You know, at the time we would do a lot of, Instagram lives of us cooking and kind of having a dinner party of just us at the house and playing all this super eclectic music.

And it was like, you know, we wanted people to walk into that within our space to kind of see and feel the experience in person.

Dalia Colón: So. . Okay. So for the people who can't make it out to your location and are now feeling inspired to make pasta at home, I have a pasta maker. It's always a mess. , it always tastes amazing.

And I always say, I'm never doing this again. This is way too much work, . So, Nick, do you have any tips for making pasta at home, whether it's [00:16:00] ingredients or technique?

Nic Bryon: So the, the pasta I make, I would always like to push people in the direction of making an egg-based pasta. that fits your diet. Um, egg yolk is the way to go.

Flour is not really the all-purpose. Flour, it's a double op, uh, flour that makes the, the pasta, the texture and everything is what you're looking for. So, and kind of patience, knowing you have to watch the dough, whether wash the dough and you can kind of tell whether it needs more moisture or whether it needs more flowers.

So it's just, it's just patience and just kind of feeling it out. It kind of all on the field. ,

Dalia Colón: what did you say? The flour that I should be using instead of all purpose, which is what I have been using .

Nic Bryon: It's called Double O. Double O. So yeah, it's a little bit finer, so it absorbs the, the egg jokes and a little bit different than all purpose

Dalia Colón: flour.

I mean, that makes sense. Pasta has so few ingredients that they all have to be amazing. And then you, oh, Greg, please. No, no, [00:17:00] nothing. Oh, I thought you were gonna add, add something. I know you're not the chef, but you, you've been doing this too. Um, I was,

Greg Bryon: I was gonna give a tip on, on whoever's cooking. Just, you know, you have to have a champion taste tester in the room. And that was my position that he cooked.

Dalia Colón: Very important, very important. What about a sauce? I know you said some people come in to pick up fresh pasta to go with their grandmother's recipe, but what if our grandmother doesn't have a recipe?

Nic Bryon: So that's when you come in and you can buy the whole pasta kit itself.

So the pasta pack is gonna have your fresh pasta, it's gonna have your sauce, it's gonna come with cheese, it comes with cooking instructions. So really, when you get home, the only thing you have to do is boil the pasta, pour a glass of wine, and you're all.

Dalia Colón: And I know you even give wine pairing recommendations.

Nic Bryon: Yes. Yes. So on our website, if you're scrolling through, trying to get an idea of what you wanna order, um, in every description, it, it is a perfect wine pairing that we recommended that goes with it.

Dalia Colón: Okay. At the beginning of this, you told me to guess who's older and I s. Still haven't really figured it out, but I'm gonna say Chef Nick is older.

Nic Bryon: I mean, I would, I appreciate that. But no.

Dalia Colón: No? Okay. Greg, you're older. What's the age difference?

Greg Bryon: Uh, I'm older than Nick. By three years.

Dalia Colón: Nick. You're three years older than Nick. Okay. So any advice for siblings working together?

Greg Bryon: Let's go with the flow . You know, like Nick, Nick knows me better than anyone on the planet, and I know him better than anyone on the planet probably, except our parents. But, you know, I think, I think that's part of the, uh, that's part of the, the energy and, and the motivation that, you know, kind of pushed us to, to do what we're doing.

You know, I know what Nick's capable of. He knows what I'm capable of, and the pressure is on from, from the moment. You know, we said, Hey, let's do this.

Dalia Colón: Do you feel pressure? Do you know what's next for this business?

Nic Bryon: Scaling , it's, it's, we're just scaling up and trying to get more and more people in here so we can kind of lift the weight off of me a little bit and that way we can meet in the middle, but in the middle a little bit more, um, with just growing, just activating the space.

And, uh, in this next 2023 we're, uh, lunches. The lunch vibe is, should be taken off here. Yeah.

Dalia Colón: A lunch vibe. I like that. . Okay, before I let you go, I gotta ask, I, I just love that you are two brothers who are also bruthas. Two African American men making pasta. Are people ever surprised by that? What kind of response do you get?

Nic Bryon: All the time.

Yeah. We get every response you can think of when we get, um, but at the end of each interaction with somebody, once they, once they come into the space and they see the fresh pasta hanging, they, they.

Greg Bryon: I think, I think, uh, people, uh, people [00:20:00] try and make, sometimes they'll come in and they're like, Hey, uh, have you have you, are you, have you been to Italy? 'Cause clearly we're not Italian.

Greg Bryon: They're like, where did you learn to cook pasta? And it's like, you know, Nick has to kind of go through like, oh, well, you know, I went to school, you know, I graduated from Johnson and Wales and studied this for a long time. I've been cooking for 15 years.

And then, you know, we have people that come in and then like, man, you know what? My mom is 85. She's Sicilian, and she would abs. She absolutely loves the pasta. She says it's the best pasta ever. And like, so it's, it's awesome. I think all in all it's, it's good compliments, all in all .

Dalia Colón: Wow. Sicilian woman praising your pasta. That's like the highest compliments.

Greg Bryon: I think we have one pasta that Nick, uh, one particular dish that Nick created that was specifically. A Sicilian grandmother's [00:21:00] birthday. It was her favorite past. Again, we're in quarantine and her daughter gave us a call and kind of said, you know, let us know the situation.

They couldn't go anywhere. This is her absolute favorite pasta. No one makes it, they don't know where to get it. She can't make it. And Nick did his, did his magic in the kitchen and created it. And I would probably say, I mean, this is two years ago, I'd probably say that they have bought more than that.

More of that pasta than anyone else. They would buy it in bulk and freezing.

Dalia Colón: Amazing. Yeah. Okay. Well, I know what I'm getting for my anniversary dinner. Nic and Greg Bryon are the co-founders of Pasta Packs. Chef Nic shared a simple pasta recipe that you can make at home. Find it on our website, the-zest-podcast-dot-com. I'm Dalia Colón. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas. Our digital team includes Chandler Balkcom and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF Public Media, copyright 2023, part of the NPR Network.

