

The Zest S7E20

Andi Perez: [00:00:00] Floridians are interested in trying new things. You know, the day of everybody going to New American restaurants, um, that has passed and now Floridians their, their pallets have opened up and they wanna try things outside of what they're used to.

Dalia Colon: 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. Have you rated The Zest in your podcast app yet? It only takes a minute and it helps other foodies to discover the pod. Now, speaking of ratings for our season finale, we are unpacking Yelp's list of the top 100 places to eat in Florida.

Quick thing before we get started this month. Busch Gardens in Tampa is highlighting foods from Latin American countries during its Viva La Musica Food Festival and Concert series, which ends on May 21st. Our brand manager, Alex, [00:01:00] got a chance to sample some of the foods during Cinco de Mayo weekend. You can see all the mouthwatering moments on Facebook and Instagram at The Zest Podcast.

Just make sure you're not watching her recap on an empty stomach. Trust me. Now, today we're getting the dish on some of Florida's best places to eat according to Yelp. You know, it's the website and app where people leave reviews of local businesses, everything from dry cleaners and locksmiths to hair salons and gyms and of course restaurants. Yelp recently released its lists of the top 100 Florida Restaurants 2023, as determined by users rankings and reviews. Not only does the list provide suggestions of eateries to add to your summer bucket list, but it reveals something about what's trending in Florida's food scene according to Andi Perez. Andi is based in Orlando and she oversee Yelp's community managers in the southeastern US, including [00:02:00] Florida. I recently chatted with Andi about what's trending in Florida's food scene, the ingredients of a good restaurant review, and her favorite eateries that haven't made the list yet.

In our conversation, Andi also spills the name of the food and drink spot she loves so much that she chose it as the venue for her wedding.

Andi Perez: Yelp is a review website and app. It's one of the most trusted ones in the world, and that's where folks go to talk about their favorite local businesses. Everything from restaurants to doctors' offices, to local parks, and

give information to other locals so that when we're making spending decisions, we know that we're making them with a little bit more information.

It is an app where folks go to find their next favorite business.

Dalia Colon: I love that. And today we're specifically talking about places to eat, which is our favorite topic here at The Zest. I gotta give a shout out to my colleague, [00:03:00] Alexandria Ebron. She received your list of top 100 places to eat in Florida. So of course we had to do an episode on this.

First of all, how is the list determined? And then let's get into some of the places that made the list.

Andi Perez: This year we did Yelp's Top a hundred Places to Eat in Florida, and we identified businesses that are in the restaurant category and those were ranked by our data scientists using a number of factors that include total volume and ratings of reviews.

Basically between January 1st, 2022 to January 1st, 2023. And then in addition to that, you know when available, all businesses on the list have a passing health score as well. So that's how we determine the list of a hundred places. It's really based on our yelpers and our reviews. It's based on locals and what they're talking about.

Dalia Colon: So here in Florida, what are they talking about?

Andi Perez: There are a hundred businesses on there, but for the most part we're, we are seeing some trends we're seeing, as [00:04:00] you would imagine in Florida, we are a global community. We are a cultural melting pot. We're seeing restaurants that cover all different cuisines all over the place.

So if you think about it, like our number one spot was a South Miami restaurant, which is Thai food and tapas. We saw a trend that seemed to be happening is that, People love things spicy, right? Like in Florida, we're down with the heat when it comes to weather, but it turns out that right now Floridians are really into spicy food.

So we're seeing on the top list, you know, number two, spot is an Indian spot that people love, the curries there. And our number 11 spot is a spicy Northern Thai cuisine, Larb Thai-Isan. And then also in Orlando, right? I'm from Orlando and we saw a bunch of great hot chicken places. So we have Jam Hot Chicken at the number four spot and Chicken Fire at number 10 spot.

We're seeing zesty jerk [00:05:00] chicken. But we're also seeing that trend, you know, carry over in Tampa Bay as well. You know, we've got Rice and Spice is, is on the list in the top 20 list. It's uh, right there in Tampa Bay and it's sushi and Asian fusion, but definitely really high on the spice ranking. So we're seeing a lot of that and we love to see it..

Floridians are interested in trying new things. You know, the day of everybody going to New American restaurants that has passed and now Floridians their, their pallets have opened up and they wanna try things outside of what they're used to.

Dalia Colon: Oh, for sure. Okay. I gotta name the number one spot because people, I don't think we said it and people will be curious: Pla-Tu Sushi, Thai, Tapas

Andi Perez: What we're seeing, right? We're seeing a lot of Southeast Asian restaurants and Pla-Tu Sushi, Thai, Tapas. You know, they've got innovative takes on Southeast Asian and Japanese favorites. Like they have the Bad [00:06:00] Boy sushi roll, for example. Um, and that's the number one spot and it's in South Miami and they're actually a newcomer.

Dalia Colon: Where can people find the full list?

Andi Perez: So if you go to Yelp's blog, you can find it. Um, it's Yelp's Top a hundred Florida Restaurants in 2023. You can also, if you go to your local Yelp Orlando, or Yelp Miami or Yelp Tampa Bay Instagram account, you're gonna see that it's linked in there with a post highlighting the restaurants that are in your local community.

And what's really fun about it is that when you do go and find the post, there is a bookmark collection on Yelp that you can click through to, and it is regionally it, it has these little dots all over Florida and you can follow that and anytime you are somewhere you can sort that list by distance.

From where you are. So wherever you are, you can find a restaurant that's on that top a hundred places to eat list, which is really exciting. Oh,

Dalia Colon: that's really cool. Because I'm in the [00:07:00] Tampa area and sometimes I will, I'll say I want Greek food, and they'll name a place in Tarpin Springs, which is fantastic.

But that's like an hour from me. Yeah. So it would be cool to know what's right where I am right now. Now, what type of person in your experience leaves a Yelp restaurant review? Because, I only review things that I absolutely loved or hated.

Andi Perez: It's interesting because the vast, vast majority of folks who are leaving reviews on Yelp are leaving positive reviews.

In fact, over 50% of the reviews on Yelp are five star reviews. That's literally the top stars that you can, that you can put in a review. So the types of people who are leaving reviews are. Folks who are excited about what they're trying and also understand that local businesses sometimes don't have a marketing budget.

And the best way that they can support a local business, especially after the past couple years we've had, is to tell their story far and wide. And you know, word of mouth is always gonna be number [00:08:00] one. Folks know that Yelp is really just word of mouth amplified, right? So not only now do my friends know about this great local business, but now everyone knows about it.

In fact, you know, when we look at the rating distributions on Yelp, nearly 80% of the reviews are three stars or higher. And that's, that's, uh, something that people are sometimes shocked to hear about. So, so actually it's like the real minority who is going on Yelp to talk about an experience that they didn't appreciate.

Dalia Colon: And then how do you know, playing devil's advocate, that the reviews are real or that they're not just the restaurant owner, their partner, their sister, that they're just regular people?

Andi Perez: We're all out there on the internet, and we know that some of the things are legitimate and some things are not so legitimate.

So what's cool about that is that Yelp's goal from the beginning has always been to provide consumers with our most useful and reliable content. And for that reason, that's why we've been really [00:09:00] recognized as one of the most aggressive, and I would say successful, uh, in the review sphere at finding and weeding out those unreliable reviews.

So we actually have an automated recommendation software that we've had at Yelp since we started. And it evaluates every review that's posted on Yelp. It evaluates it based on hundreds of signals of quality, reliability, um, user activity

on Yelp, IP addresses, all kinds of things. And then the reviews that it identifies as the most helpful or the most reliable are recommended.

Truth be told, probably somewhere in the 75% of reviews that are added on Yelp are currently recommended, and that means there's about a 25% on there that we're not sure about yet. So we're not gonna recommend them, and they're not gonna affect the average star rating. What's interesting about that, that I wanna mention is that when I first [00:10:00] started writing reviews on Yelp, I went on one day and I wrote like 10, five star reviews all at once because I was like, oh my gosh, I can't believe I haven't done this before.

And my reviews were not recommended at first because it's, you know, maybe it could have looked like to, um, an automated software that like, Hey, this looks a little suspicious and we know nothing about this person, right. And as I continued writing reviews and adding photos, I mean, obviously this automated software.

Could tell that I was a real person because now all of my reviews are recommended. And so that's just to give you like a little anecdotal information about how that works.

Dalia Colon: Okay. And I didn't even think about that, especially in this age of like chat G P T or whatever it's called. There might be some bots trying to write fake restaurant reviews, but why would you wanna write a fake review when there's so much good food to be had in Florida?

Okay, so part of the information that we received from Yelp was as follows, Florida is having a big foodie moment with Bon Appetit naming Miami, the Food City of the [00:11:00] Year, and Yelp's top 100 Florida list. So I struggle with this because the James Beard Awards are always snubbing Florida and Tampa Bay in particular.

Same thing with the Michelin guide. So do those sort of legacy types of recognition matter as much today as something like a Yelp review?

Andi Perez: Yeah, I mean, I love that question, um, because some of my favorites have gotten smelled as well, and I get real salty. Um, I think all of us do when we love a local business.

Like we, we ride for that business, right? The difference there is it, our list like covers all restaurants in a wide range of places to eat from the white tablecloth to the cafes and sandwich shops like real mom and pop places also. And

sometimes we've got taco places that are literally located inside a gas station and it's on these lists.

And that's why I love this list because it's like truly homegrown. It's locals telling [00:12:00] what they love. You know, some of the other lists are, are restaurant critics and both local and sometimes folks coming from out of town and, and so there's value to that. Sure. But I think it's best to look at all of these lists together to get an idea where you wanna go, because.

Sometimes I wanna get real bougie and I'm gonna maybe go to that Michelin star restaurant. But sometimes I go to my local taqueria and I have a better time. And that's not ending up on any of these like maybe more fancy lists. That's ending up on our locals lists.

Dalia Colon: So maybe that's the power of Yelp. A place that started out as a food truck or a gas station location could end up doing really well.

Andi Perez: Yeah, I mean actually like when you think about it, those food trucks, those like smaller, maybe popups, They are not able to use a lot of budget towards marketing, right? So it's really like fully based on word of mouth and then it really is based on what you're putting out and the experience that you're creating for folks.

So, [00:13:00] absolutely it. We've seen some tiny little spots in Orlando that suddenly blow up because everyone's talking about it, and now they have these brick and mortars. So I, I'd love to hear those stories. We're seeing that all over the state.

Dalia Colon: Well, as a Florida resident, what are some of your spots? What are some that you think deserve to be on the list?

Andi Perez: Oh my goodness. I love this question. There is nothing I love more than talking about my favorite food spots. So I would have to say number one on my list has to be Reyes Mezcaleria. It's a super cool, amazing Mexican restaurant and it's fully woman led, and so that's everything from woman owned. To female woman chef.

She's Mexican American. She's incredible. Chef Wendy, big shout out there. The GM is a woman. The pastry chef is a woman. The beverage director is a woman. She runs the bar and everything there. It is. It is woman led all the way, but when it comes down to it, the food [00:14:00] is damn good. They are, like I mentioned, a mezcaleria, so they have hundreds of different mezcals that you

can try and everything, but the food is, it shows in Chef Wendy's cooking and preparation, that she's taking recipes from her hometown in Michoacan and bringing it to Orlando and elevating it in a whole new way.

And so that has to be like my number one spot at the moment. In fact, it's so much so. But I actually chose it as my place to get married last year.

Dalia Colon: Oh, get out in Orlando, you said?

Andi Perez: It's in Orlando? Mm-hmm.

Dalia Colon: That's so fun. I did go to a wedding that had tacos and it was the best thing. I'm like, why would you have anything else?

Andi Perez: Oh, Oh, it was amazing. And the truth is that, um, that I think people are gonna start going that way, really thinking about their favorite restaurants and thinking, how can I use this spot for a great event? Or something like that, versus maybe going to a hotel ballroom or, or that, so I knew that having worked at Yelp for so long, I had something to prove and I had [00:15:00] to have the best food at my wedding.

So why not just choose my favorite restaurant?

Dalia Colon: That's so smart. Our colleague at WUSF Public Media Daylina Miller recently got married and some of us attended and they had pizza and cookies. Yes. And it was the best because that's the food you actually want to eat.

So down to Earth Foods are, are coming out of the gas station and the pizza parlor and the Taka and coming to some of these more special life events. What are some other trends you think we'll be seeing in the future in [00:16:00] terms of Florida restaurants?

Andi Perez: Yeah, I mean I love thinking about what's coming in the future and what I'm starting to see bubble up.

Um, I've talked to a bunch of the community managers before I ever talked to you because I was saying, Hey, I know what I'm seeing in Orlando. I wanna know what we're seeing all around. And one thing that we all were sensing was everyone's been, you know, our pallets have changed and foodies, uh, in all different parts of Florida are starting to go to really authentic restaurants that represent cuisines that they may maybe have never tried before.

What I see happening in the future, and it's already starting to happen in a really cool way. Is rather than, you know, we've seen a lot of, um, maybe Asian fusion restaurants or Latin fusion restaurants, well now we're gonna start seeing more of these fusion restaurants, but two different cuisines that maybe you wouldn't expect to see together.

So like we've got. Ava Mediterranean here in Orlando, and it's Latin and Mediterranean food combined. You know, one of the places that I was gonna mention, but it's my late night [00:17:00] food spot, Tako Cheena over here in Orlando also, it's Latin Asian fusion tacos. And you know, when you were talking about tacos, I was like, and we're talking about spice.

How about we put some different cuisines together that we've never seen before? You know, Yelpers, love Ethiopian places, places in Southeast Asia that maybe, um, they haven't, they didn't used to eat, uh, 10 years ago or something. So now we're gonna start seeing a lot of chef collaborations, a lot more of them, and potentially some of these chef collaborations or popups will turn into actual brick and mortar spaces.

Dalia Colon: Oh, this is so exciting. Now, you mentioned that when you first started leaving Yelp reviews yourself, they weren't getting a lot of love, so a lot of people listening probably leave reviews or have a blog or even just, you know, snap a picture of their food and post it on Instagram with some comments.

What are the ingredients of a good food review?

Andi Perez: Oh yes. What are the ingredients of a good food review? Well, I'll [00:18:00] tell you how I start. Every Yelp review is I say five stars because, and I do basically A T L D R too long, didn't read. So the first section is like, Five stars because you gotta try their kimchi fries.

And then I go into some more of it. So a good food review gives you right at the top what you need to order quickly. And then we go into some details. I wanna know ambiance, I wanna know, do I need to dress fancy for this or is this casual? People are wanting to know, are there. Baby changing areas. Are there gender neutral bathrooms?

Like, what does this look like? Is this standing room only? Am I gonna be sitting, do I need a reservation? And so, you know, when I'm talking to people about what makes a really great food review, yes, of course. Talk to me about the food that you love, that drinks that you love. Always shout out that staff

member that gave you some love, some special love, but also tell me about all the other stuff that practically like I wanna know before I [00:19:00] go somewhere.

Dalia Colon: That's so good. The baby changing station we took our kids to, they're older, but we took them to Kabooki Sushi in Orlando, which was so good. But I felt like maybe this is not a place to bring a child on a Saturday night, and maybe I should have known that ahead of time. Oh, and where

Andi Perez: It's funny that is, That is something that people mention like, is this good for kids?

Like some things are, and some things like a little bit less, and that's good for parents to know, but it's also good for non-parents to know like, oh, here's a spot I can go if maybe I am up to here with my nephews and I wanna get some adult time.

Dalia Colon: Or if you're a parent and you hired a babysitter and the last thing you wanna see on your date night is a child.

Andi Perez: Yeah. What people snapp your finger? What people can't see is that I'm snapping my fingers at that one.

Dalia Colon: Absolutely. That's me. I'm pointing at myself. Where do we get the good kimchi fries, by the way?

Andi Perez: Oh, well, when I mentioned the kimchi fries, my mind was on Tako Cheena. But, but truthfully, if you look up kimchi fries on Yelp right now, you're gonna see places.

No matter where [00:20:00] you are in Florida, you're gonna see places nearby you that are, that are doing this. There are some really cool, you know, second generation, third generation Asian restaurants who are doing some really fun things with classic American dishes. And, uh, adding a, a fun Asian twist.

Dalia Colon: I never even thought about kimchi fries.

Now, when people think of Florida cuisine, their mind probably goes to seafood. Is seafood still big or are you seeing other meats or even plant-based foods starting to take over?

Andi Perez: It's interesting because. Absolutely plant-based foods are having a moment, and I don't think that moment is ever gonna end. I think we finally moved to a place where we are accommodating different diets.

My husband's vegetarian, my sister is vegan. Like it's important to me that I can go somewhere where I can get some food and he can get some food too. So we're seeing restaurants that aren't necessarily vegan altogether. But having really strong vegan [00:21:00] menus or, uh, vegan dishes on their menus. And I'm obsessed with that personally.

But when it comes to seafood, it's funny, I just went to Kaya, which is a really great, pretty new, they're, they're under six months old right now. Uh, Filipino restaurant here in Orlando. And, uh, they focus on, you know, locally caught amazing seafood. Right. And they're getting it. From the shores of Florida.

So I don't think seafood is ever gonna be far from our culinary scene in Florida. We're just starting to see restaurants do it in, in innovative ways, thinking of different ways to prepare it that might not be what your grandparents were eating.

Dalia Colon: So much to try. Maybe summer's a good time to sort of put together a bucket list or a Bingo card or something and, and go try some of these new places with your friends and family.

Okay. Before I let you go, is there anything you're working on now that we can look forward to in the future?

Andi Perez: Our Yelp community managers are [00:22:00] forever hosting fun events for locals in their communities. Uh, you know, our Tampa Bay community manager just hosted an event with the Rowdies, right? A soccer game, so it's not always food focused.

And so right now our community managers, especially going into the summer, are focusing on throwing some events that are not just for our Elite Yelpers. And when I say Elite Yelpers, those are our cream of the crop top Yelpers that are nominated to be part of the elite squad. And they get invited to really fun parties.

They're just the most active and positive contributors on Yelp. And they're, they're local foodies, right? Well, Our community managers in May and beyond are gonna be focusing also on hosting events that anyone with a Yelp account can attend and can RSVP to. So I would just say if no matter what community

you're in, in Florida, look for your local Yelp community manager on Instagram by looking up Yelp Orlando, Yelp Tampa Bay, Yelp Jacksonville, et cetera, because they're gonna be posting on there some great [00:23:00] links over time for fantastic events to attend.

Even if you're brand new to Yelp. And more than that, they're also gonna be focusing on telling the stories of local business owners with "Meet the Owners" posts, telling you everything that's new and hot in the community. So, uh, that's one thing that I wanna make sure to plug, is that they are working hard to highlight, uh, the biggest, baddest, awesome things in their community.

And I, I hope folks will give them a, a follow.

Dalia Colon: Andi, this was so great. This was so much fun. I've been standing at home for way too long. I need to get outta the house and and try some of these great restaurants. Last question, where will you eat next?

Andi Perez: Oh, that's great. So there is a sushi counter. It's a standup sushi counter in Orlando.

It's called Edo Boy, e D o Boy. I have to check it out. You get a reservation, you go for one hour. You're standing there probably with 10 people or less, and I need to check this out is like omakasi style. You're gonna get that one [00:24:00] exquisite piece of sushi handed to you along with everyone who's standing with you.

I am super stoked about it so that's my next spot. In South Tampa, I would tell you, you need to check out Izakaya Tori. It landed as number 49 on Yelp's top a hundred lists of places to eat. And they have some really great yaka Tori, which is, you know, meat on a skewer. And they've also got really great, uh, sushi and all kinds of delicious things there, Udon, ramen, everything.

So I would definitely recommend checking out. Izakaya Tori. And when you do make sure to post some pictures, cause I'm gonna be following you. And, uh, then I'll see which dishes I have to order when I go there.

Dalia Colon: Perfect. Consider it done. You can be my foodie fairy godmother and just come around and tell me where to eat.

Honestly, half the battle is figuring out where to go, but if you have a review, whether it's Yelp or someplace else that tells you what the best places are in your area, why wouldn't you just go there?

Andi Perez: Exactly, [00:25:00] and like. Even when you're traveling to other cities, it's like I might not have friends there that can tell me what's like the hottest spot, what's the coolest little spot, but at least I can go on and search restaurants or lunch or something like that on Yelp and locals can tell me that way.

So I will be your, uh, fairy food godmother and then if ever you can't get in touch with me cuz you know, maybe I'm out walking the dog or maybe I'm over having some mezcal at Reyes.. You can always go on Yelp and check it out.

Dalia Colon: Sounds good. Thank you so much, Andy. This was a lot of fun.

Andi Perez: I really appreciated it.

Dalia Colon: That was Andi Perez of Yelp. You can find the full list of Yelp's Top 100 Places to Eat in Florida online. There's a link to it on our website, the zestpodcast.com. That's also a great place to discover new recipes and catch up on any interviews you may have missed while our team takes some time off and cooks up some new episodes for you.

I'm Dalia Colon. I produce the Zest with Andrew Lucas. Our digital team includes [00:26:00] Alexandria Ebron and Chandler Balkcom. The Zest is a production of W U S F Public Media copyright 2023, part of the NPR network.