

The Zest S8E1

Courtney Ellison: [00:00:00] We have a really good balance here and my goal for them is to get them through 162 games without them getting sick of the food.

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. Today we're sliding into your podcast feed with our Season eight premiere.

A conversation with Courtney Ellison, dietician for the Tampa Bay Rays.

When you hear the term baseball foods, you likely conjure up visions of hot dogs and popcorn, peanuts and crackerjack, but those stadium treats won't exactly fuel the players on the field. That's where Courtney Ellison comes in as dietician for the Tampa Bay Rays. Courtney is responsible for fueling the players on and off the field. That means offering plenty of options for pre and post-game meals, as well as mid-game snacks in the dugout. I recently chatted with Courtney [00:01:00] about what the guys eat, how meals and hydration change when the team is on the road, and how the new rules of Major League Baseball affect her job.

Courtney Ellison: It's kind of twofold. I have the food service side and then I have the performance side. We handle everything from all of the home meals here while we're at home, plane meals when we go on the road, so whenever we get on the plane and then food while we're on the road. So lots of food service. And then on the other side we have the performance side, which is hydration, rehab, just daily fueling education.

We get a little bit of everything.

Dalia Colon: So how did you get this job?

Courtney Ellison: I spent three years with the Pittsburgh Pirates before I took this role, and my boss with the Pittsburgh Pirates was actually my boss when I was at the University of [00:02:00] Tennessee Knoxville. So I interned with her while I was still in undergrad and then went on, did my graduate courses, got a clinical job, stayed in touch with her.

She knew that I wanted to get back into sports. She ended up leaving UT, took the job with the Pirates and then she gave me a call. So I immediately jumped at the opportunity, moved to Florida, and then now I'm here. Here you

Dalia Colon: are. That's so great. You, here I am. You said you wanted to get back into sports.

What did you love about meshing the worlds of food and sports?

Courtney Ellison: My undergrad, I actually double majored with kinesiology and nutrition, so I really enjoyed both sides of the performance movement side and then how can nutrition help that and vice versa. I enjoyed doing both of those things. Allison Mauer was my boss at UT.

She actually came and talked to one of our classes, and this was kind of when sports nutrition was up and coming, and I [00:03:00] didn't really know it was a thing. So when I interned with her, as soon as I got into that environment, I knew that this is exactly what I wanted to do. You're working with athletes who wanna get better every day.

Who have a lot of questions all of the time. So the education component was there. It was just a really fun environment. I knew from then on out, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to work with athletes.

Dalia Colon: Okay, so speaking of having a lot of questions, I posted on Facebook that I was gonna be talking to you, and I'm gonna hold this up.

I have four pages of typed questions.

Courtney Ellison: Oh my goodness.

Dalia Colon: We probably won't get to all of them, but thank you to everyone who submitted your great questions and we're just gonna like burn through as many as we can. Okay. So we had several people ask different versions of what do they eat on a game day, like before, maybe even during, and then after a game.

Courtney Ellison: Yeah. So typical day here is say we have a 6:40 game. The clubhouse is gonna open around 1:40, so when the guys get here, they have an arrival meal. They eat when they get into the clubhouse, and so [00:04:00] that meal is just like a typical lunch, I would say. We provide multiple protein options, multiple carbohydrate options and multiple vegetable options.

We have a full salad bar, deli bar, fruit bar, all of the things. And then they'll have another meal pre-game. So for that pre-game meal, we like to keep it a little bit lighter with leaner proteins, quick carbs, things like that. We'll always have a couple handheld options for the guys that just wanna grab something quick that don't wanna sit down and eat.

So we'll have a few special options for them. And then for post-game, we can go a little bit heavier. So, Some more of those fattier meats or things like that that we wouldn't typically serve. Pregame, we'll serve those postgame. And then of course, any of the special requests that we get for guys that want special meals, we'll always do that postgame.

So we get a lot of pizza, a lot of Italian, we'll go postgame, they get three meals a day, so it's nutrition and fueling all day long. It's a full-time job here.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Marissa wants to know what are they eating in the dugout?

Courtney Ellison: In the dugout, they have a lot of quick carb options. We have the honey [00:05:00] finger waffle, a couple different bars that are higher on the carb side that are easy to digest.

Anything that's gonna be quick and easy for them to get, so when they get back on the field, they're not feeling weighed down. It gives them a burst to energy. Small items like that.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Now, do you actually go on the road with them? You talked about making plans for going on the road. How does your job change when you're on the road?

Courtney Ellison: It's actually a bit lower key while we're on the road, we have less people coming through the clubhouse, so it's generally a lot more calm. But I would say that the food service side of it is definitely more difficult because we're working with outside caterers or really small, older clubhouses. So the environment changes a little bit that we have to kind of work around different challenges.

When we're on the road, it can be a little bit more difficult, but it is definitely lower Key guys are a little bit more calm on the road cuz it's just a lot less going on.

Dalia Colon: Okay. And I did get several versions of the same [00:06:00] question, which is basically asking about junk food. Yeah. Um, Mark asked

how do they maintain a year-round discipline diet, or don't they, do they cheat during the off season when you're on the road and, and you can't necessarily babysit them?

Are they going off and getting things that you wouldn't want them to have? How does that work?

Courtney Ellison: Yeah, we have a good balance here. I wouldn't say that we have cheat meals or cheat foods or anything like that. It's like I said, if fueling is a a full-time job, it's 24 7 from the time they get up to the time that they're going to bed.

So we try to keep it as balanced as possible. If I put out a meal that is too healthy and no one eats it, then you know I'm really not doing my job either, cuz then they're not eating the food. So we keep it pretty balanced here. They have all the items, the ice cream, the candies at their disposal if they want it.

But because that we do have it at their disposal, honestly, it's a lot of education on when they should have it, when they shouldn't have it. And for the most part, these guys are pretty in tune with the routine that they know if they're playing or if [00:07:00] they're not, and what they should and shouldn't have.

So they're pretty disciplined about it. I would say, even though it is available pretty much at any clubhouse, we go to our clubhouse visiting clubhouses. They're pretty good about choosing when they want it.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Janet had a related question about the younger players, like you have a lot of guys in their twenties.

Yeah. They might not care. They might be able to get away with eating things that an older player can't. So what does that education look like?

Courtney Ellison: It's a little different for the younger players cause their routines aren't as established as some of the older guys that we have. They haven't been here as long.

They haven't gotten into the routine of the schedule as long as the other guys have. So it's a lot of education on really just fine tuning what works for them and what it looks like at this level. It's 162 games. We don't get that many off days. How are we gonna make it through the full season healthy?

Not feeling fatigued with as much energy as possible. So it's a lot of just fine tuning their routines or for the younger guys starting to build out what that [00:08:00] routine looks like for them because they didn't have it as much in the minor leagues. It's different for each player, but the younger guys, it's kind of fun cuz we get to kind of start from scratch and build out what that routine looks like.

Dalia Colon: And then what about for you? You're taking care of them, but who's taking care of you? Because we were supposed to do this interview in person and then you were under the weather. I could see with all those games that you could get rundown.

Courtney Ellison: Yeah, it's a, it's a long season and we work long days, but I have a great training staff here, so they're the ones that take care of me whenever I'm feeling sick.

Luckily, we all have each other's backs, so it's nice that I have the doctors and the trainers at my disposal whenever I need to use 'em, which is nice.

Dalia Colon: Oh, that is nice. And then I think I saw, yeah, did I see on Instagram that you have a young

daughter?

Courtney Ellison: Yes. She's almost two, so she's wild and crazy.

Dalia Colon: Oh my gosh. So how is that, if you're on the road so much?

Courtney Ellison: It's been an adjustment for sure. Last year was an adjustment. She was a bit younger. I think it's harder this year because she's older, a lot more [00:09:00] mobile, so she's all over the place. It's definitely an adjustment for me and my husband both, but he's great and supportive and allows me.

To really make the schedule that I need to make to be with the team when I need to be. So I travel about 70% of the time, not full-time. It works out that way. And they're actually, we have a family trip, next road trip, so they'll be on that trip, which will be really fun.

Dalia Colon: Oh, that's so fun. So they're coming with you?

Courtney Ellison: Yes. All the fam, well, not all of them, but a lot of the families will be coming with us on this next trip. So it'll be a lot of kids.

Dalia Colon: Oh my gosh, that's so much fun. She's probably so proud of you and your husband too. So, speaking of road trips, is there an adjustment in terms of nutrition or hydration, depending on where you're playing?

Because we're here in Florida, it's hot and humid. Mm-hmm. On one hand, but on the other hand, they're playing in air conditioning. What happens when they go to an outdoor stadium or what happens when they go to Arizona and it's very dry?

Courtney Ellison: It definitely is an adjustment, and again, a lot of education. While we're on the road, we have a couple different methods that we use for hydration.

We test our sweat sodium rate, [00:10:00] so we'll do that during spring training or once a year just to see how much salt that they're actually losing in their sweat. Then we'll take that number and use it throughout the season so we can actually test their hydration in real time as well. So when I test their hydration in real time, I'll use that in comparison to their sweat sodium rate and give them a recommendation on what they should be taking that day or how much fluid they should be consuming that day.

So luckily we have a lot more tools now that we can use for hydration, which is really fun, and the guys have really bought into it. It does help on the hydration front. We'll say that a lot of guys will just come in that day and say, let's test my hydration. You know, I'm not feeling like I'm fully hydrated today.

Let me see where I'm at. It's definitely an adjustment on the road because we do play indoors here that they do kind of forget like, Hey, I had to hydrate because it's a solid 65 or set. I don't know what the temperature is in the Trop, but it's pretty chilly in my office, so I say 65, but they're used to playing indoors and not sweating as much.

So whenever we do go to Baltimore or New York when it's really hot and humid it, it [00:11:00] definitely changes the games of them for sure.

Dalia Colon: What's a takeaway for the rest of us? Because I'm not a pro athlete, but I'm sweating. Just like the other day, we were putting up a volleyball net for our daughter in the backyard and my husband and I were mm-hmm.

Drenched. So without having you to help us, what can the rest of us do to make sure we're staying hydrated?

Courtney Ellison: A lot of times it's really just reminding yourself to drink fluids. I think that's the, it sounds so easy, just, you know, you gotta drink water, drink fluids, but we all have a bias saying that, oh, I think I'm hydrated, or I drink plenty. Today. When you look at how much you actually drink, you maybe [00:12:00] drink 16 to 24 ounces of water in the last four or five hours.

So really just keeping the reminders of, Hey, I'm outside. I'm sweating. I gotta stay hydrated. And then if you're outside for long periods of time, Maybe adding in a sports drink, whatever that looks like for you. And your day is a lot. It's a lot. It's just reminders. I would say it's, and same for these guys, it's a lot of reminders all of the time just to stay hydrated cuz it's something that we, we remember to do, but it's really hard to actually do.

Dalia Colon: It is, and I've got my water bottle here. I used to, yeah. Rubber bands around it. And I would start with like, Eight at the top and then I would move them down for each bottle I drank and I got outta that habit, but I probably should get back to that. It gets warmer. So thank you for that reminder. So Janet and Maggie were both wondering about the protein and calorie needs of the different positions.

Does it change based on the position they're playing?

Courtney Ellison: It does a little bit. I would say it changes more based off the person versus the position. I would say. I don't have. This isn't football if I don't have a bunch of defensive alignments in here or anything like that. [00:13:00] But I do have guys that play every day, and then I have guys that play every five days.

So it definitely depends on what their needs are and their workload demands. Which I work very closely with strength and conditioning and athletic training to monitor what those workloads look like, and then I can kind of match it on the nutrition side, it varies player to player, and again, if they're injured or if they're not, it's gonna vary between all of them.

Different protein needs, different calorie needs. But I do preach to all of them regardless of what their needs are, just to make sure that. They're getting protein in consistently. That's the main goal for them, is to make sure that they're not front loading or back loading their protein intake to where they're just

consistently getting it throughout the day to really maximize their recovery and performance.

Dalia Colon: What are some of their sources of protein? I know you said before a game you would go for the lean protein and then after maybe the fattier ones. What are some examples?

Courtney Ellison: Mm-hmm. We have a lot of chicken. Chicken is our main protein before the game, just cuz it's one of the leaner proteins. Some guys will go for some sandwiches.

Which we [00:14:00] load up with some protein because a lot of times they think they're getting more than what they really are. So they'll have a lot of sandwiches. Uh, we have Greek yogurt, beef jerky, things like that, which I wouldn't typically recommend right before a game. But those are the items that they had to choose from throughout the day that we have available in the clubhouse.

Dalia Colon: Okay. I don't know if you can name names, but Jeff wants to know who's the biggest gourmand on the team. So who's the biggest foodie?

Courtney Ellison: I don't have a ton of foodies. I'll say I have. A lot of really basic eaters. I don't, I don't know if I have a foodie.

Dalia Colon: So when you say basic, what kind of stuff do they go for?

It sounds like you're giving them a lot of options.

Courtney Ellison: As long as I have options, then I hear no complaints. There's no complaints with food ever. If there's options. As far as basic, like, these guys really, they don't want anything super fancy. They just want the general, like chicken, broccoli, rice, and beans, you know, just the, the basic things that, you know, we would typically eat at home or if we go out to eat, but anytime we get too [00:15:00] fancy or there's a lot of items mixed into one dish, then they won't touch it.

So, just have to remember that we're, we're feeding humans just like us, so they wanna eat similar to what we wanna eat. They're just doing it before a game.

Dalia Colon: What's an example of something you offered that was not a home run with them?

Courtney Ellison: Anything that they have never seen before is always touch and go. So some guys, like with couscous, they have no idea what couscous is.

So they'll look at it and be like, huh, okay, I'm gonna eat some rice. So just different items that they really haven't been exposed to, which is my job to expose them to that. So I still enjoy it and love to educate them whenever we have new items. But those are the ones that are typically a little bit harder to get them to eat.

Dalia Colon: So this is like parallel tracks with having a young child at home and like getting them Yeah. To eat new foods and you have to like play all these Jedi mind tricks to get them to try something new. That's so funny. So yeah, it's, this is, this is a theme in your life, I guess. Um, [00:16:00] yes. And then Carlos wants to know, he said that Wander Franco's favorite food is Arroz con Huevos Y Aguacates. So rice and eggs with avocado. I don't know how he knows that. Mm-hmm. But he is a James Beard Award-winning, uh, food writer. So if anyone knew Carlos, ask, but, um, that begs the question. You have a lot of players from other countries who might have their preferences. You talked about rice and beans.

Are there any other foods from their home countries that you've learned to make?

Courtney Ellison: We actually have a good relationship with a lot of the Latin restaurants in the St. Pete area. So what we'll do is we'll actually cater out a lot of the Latin food based off the preferences of the guys, mainly because we can make them in house, but these guys know when they're really authentic and when they come from people that are authentically making their Latin food.

So we use different restaurants around the area and depending on what they're asking for, whether it be empanadas or mongu, whatever that looks like, we'll cater it from Latin restaurants in the area.

Dalia Colon: No, that's making [00:17:00] me hungry. Okay. Yeah, Jeff. Jeff and Andy asked if any of the players have pre or post-game rituals.

Like they always wanna eat the same thing or have the same treat or anything like that.

Courtney Ellison: We do have a couple players that have those rituals. I don't know if it's superstition or if it's just their routine, which baseball is a very superstitious sport regardless. So it could be a little bit of both. But we do have

a few players that will want like a applesauce and a, a honey singer waffle right before the game.

Or they'll eat a quesadilla before every game or something like that. That's just lighter on their stomachs because that's what they know. So we do have a few guys, but I would say it's just a handful. Not a lot.

Dalia Colon: And I don't know if you have anything to do with the food that like a fan would eat at the stadium, but do the guys ever get a chance to eat those foods or are those just completely off limits?

Courtney Ellison: I do not have anything to do with the, the food that the fans eat in the stadium. No, they're not off limits. Like I said, we have a really good balance [00:18:00] here and my goal for them is to get them through 162 games without them getting sick of the food or not wanting to eat the food that we provide. So it's a good mix up of here is what I would recommend post-game. And then here's Shake Shack because we're in, you know, New York and that's what they have in Stadium, something like that. So they definitely get a good balance of both.

Dalia Colon: That's so tempting because on vacation you just wanna give yourself permission to eat whatever you want.

But when they're traveling, like half the year, you, you can't really do that. Yeah.

Courtney Ellison: It's a lot of travel.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Now we spoke with Tracy Hartman, who's the head chef for the Buccaneers. Have, have you ever met her?

Courtney Ellison: I have not.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Cuz you guys seem, I mean it's a pretty small club that you're in and she said something similar about, you know, the season goes on and I've gotta get them through this long season.

And I have these sort of like a rabbit that I pull out of my hat midway through the season to keep them motivated. So do you have any dishes that you hold off on [00:19:00] until you feel like the guys really need to pick me up?

Courtney Ellison: Towards the end of the season, we'll start to use different restaurants in the area just to add to what we're providing, just to, you know, give them a little boost so that they're not seeing the same things over and over.

Now on the road, we see a lot of the same menu items, a lot of Italian, Mexican, things like that, just because it's safe to cater.

Dalia Colon: And do things change postseason?

Courtney Ellison: Postseason? Yes. Now I can only say that I've only experienced one postseason, so I can't speak too much to that, but we only had three days of postseason last year, so we added a little bit more just to make sure there was enough options that everybody had something that they would eat before they got on the field.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Is there somebody who's like the picky one?

Courtney Ellison: I do have some picky guys, I will say, but for the most part, I have a younger team, which makes it really fun because they'll try new things and they'll give me feedback if they don't like something. So for the most part, [00:20:00] like. Even if they are picky, they'll at least give me feedback on why they don't like it.

Or, you know, they have something else that they could or couldn't eat. You know, they'll, they'll eat something. So for the most part it's not too bad.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Well, I could talk to you all day. I just find this fascinating. But I have to ask you about yourself. You said you were into sports nutrition. Were you ever an athlete yourself?

Courtney Ellison: I was back in the day. I did not, I, I did not play college sports. So whenever I went to school, I was trying to figure out a way to mesh my background in sports into what I wanted to do with my career. So that's kind of where I landed on mixing nutrition and kinesiology. And that turned out to be sports nutrition.

So I used to play volleyball and softball, and then my husband played collegiate baseball. So, I have a good history in baseball. I at least know what's going on for the most part. There's a lot of ins and outs of Major League baseball that I'm still trying to learn the details, but for the most part I have a good grasp on what's going on here.

So that, that definitely [00:21:00] helped.

Dalia Colon: Oh, I'm sure. Especially since they're changing the rules now to try to make the game a little faster. Now, what affected your, your job, because they're trying to make it faster pace, which would in theory make the game shorter. Does that change how you plan their meals?

Courtney Ellison: It has. So before, which it hasn't changed as much for the production side, but the timing part of it, we definitely had more time to prepare post-game meal or when we were on the road, we had more time before they delivered that post-game meal. And now it's a lot faster and some games are lasting, you know, just two hours.

So we have to make sure the food is there pretty much as soon as they step on the field, we're waiting on that post-game delivery.

Dalia Colon: Wow. Okay. And I know the guys aren't supposed to be eating the stadium food, but if you ever get a chance to eat it, what's your favorite stadium treat?

Courtney Ellison: Ooh, that's a tough one Here at the Trop.

Now, I've not tried them, but they have some really good chicken tenders and fries it looks like. So I may have to venture out one [00:22:00] day and try those while I'm sitting in the stands. But otherwise, I don't venture out too much into the stands. So, I'm not entirely sure what I would eat. Hmm. Maybe a, you know what?

Maybe a ballpark hotdog, cuz that's baseball, but we'll go with that.

Dalia Colon: That's classic. That's totally classic. Yeah. Well, thank you so much. This was so much fun to talk to you about your job. Go Rays.

Courtney Ellison: Yes. Thank you.

Dalia Colon: Courtney Ellison is dietician for the Tampa Bay Rays. If you wanna hydrate like a pro, try Courtney's recipe for a tropical hydration smoothie. Perfect for summer in Florida. You'll find it on our website, the zest podcast com. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas. Our digital team includes Alexandria Ebron and Chandler Balkcom. The Zest as a production of WUSF Public Media.

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