

# The Zest S8E2

**Kenny Gilbert:** [00:00:00] You know, cooking for Oprah's Christmas party is relatively easy. It's like cooking for your great auntie and family.

**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.

**Dalia Colon:** He's a cookbook author, restaurant owner, and friend of Oprah. Today we're catching up with one of the busiest guys in Florida's culinary scene, chef Kenny Gilbert.

**Dalia Colon:** Kenny Gilbert is one busy guy. On top of being chef and owner of Silkie's Chicken and Champagne Bar in Jacksonville, and Vice President of Culinary Operations for Grove Bay Hospitality Group in Miami, Kenny is the author of the new cookbook *Southern Cooking Global Cuisine*. Between his book tour and overseeing multiple restaurants, the Top Chef alum is always on the go, [00:01:00] so we caught up with Kenny at where else? Jacksonville International Airport. You'll hear some hustle and bustle in the background while Kenny awaited his flight to Miami. The Cleveland native shared his culinary journey advice for kids' barbecue. He got his first grill at the ripe old age of seven, and how his pal, Oprah Winfrey inspired the concept for Silkies.

**Kenny Gilbert:** The Southeast Fruit and Wine Festival has a, uh, an event every year. It's called Chicken Coop, and they highlight, uh, fried chicken and Dom Perignon usually. And so my restaurant back in the day, Gilbert's Underground Kitchen, was featured there many years ago, and my wife, she had said, oh my gosh, we did, we need to bring something like this back to Jacksonville.

**Kenny Gilbert:** And we were already serving fried chicken and we already had champagne and we had barbecue. Like that restaurant was, everything you could think of as Southern under one roof, which normally you can't get, you can't find, go to a spot and get [00:02:00] great Southern fare and barbecue and seafood all in one place but we created that model.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Well, pre pandemic, I decided not to renew my leases for that restaurant. And then when the pandemic hit and we were on lockdown, I was doing meals out of my house for like six months and I, I was analyzing pretty

much what we were selling and whatnot. And then there was a, a space available in our neighborhood of Springfield, which is in Jacksonville.

**Kenny Gilbert:** I had been doing chicken and biscuits for a long time, and I do that for Oprah Winfrey for the, uh, the holidays and whatnot for the last several years. And one of her favorite dishes that I did was, uh, chicken and biscuits.

**Dalia Colon:** Okay, we gotta back up because you mentioned Oprah just so casually. We have to like dig deep on this.

**Dalia Colon:** How does one even get their food to Oprah?

**Kenny Gilbert:** In my mind, it's all about paying it forward. One of my really close friends, Sonny Sweetman became her personal chef back in 2013, 2014. He contacted me [00:03:00] after he took the job and says, Hey man, I just got a new job. I'm gonna be, uh, Oprah's personal chef. And I would love for you to come on with me whenever we do special events, have you fly out, execute the events with me and whatnot.

**Kenny Gilbert:** And then I was like, yeah, man, for sure. So back in 2014, I literally flew out, did a big gala event where I, I first met her. And then from that point on, I was coming out for the holidays, uh, whether it be Thanksgiving or Christmas. And so there's a team of, there's a few of us that basically, that she trusts to come in and manage her home based on her preferences.

**Kenny Gilbert:** And I am one of 'em, Maitland's, another chef. You know, we're all kind of like Top Chef alumni. We all work together at some point in time, and we're a great team, you know, so that's kind of how it came about. So since 2014, I've been cooking for. It always depends on what's going on.

**Dalia Colon:** That's amazing. Okay. You are a Top Chef alum, so what's more stressful cooking on a TV food competition show or [00:04:00] cooking for Oprah's Christmas party?

**Kenny Gilbert:** You know, cooking for Oprah's Christmas party is relatively easy. It's a, it's a set amount of people. It's like cooking for your great auntie and family. It is not, it doesn't seem to be work ever. It's literally, Hey, you know what? She loves food. We created all these really cool cycle menus so that every day is a little bit different during the holidays.

**Kenny Gilbert:** So one day we could do Thai and then we could do Chinese. One day we could do French, Mediterranean. Uh, of course Southern is always

gonna be sprinkled in there. Indian, we do a little bit of everything, you know, Burger Wars. We have a great concept we call Burger Wars. We highlight four different types of burgers and truffle fries and, and it's just, it's just fun.

**Kenny Gilbert:** It's, it's family and fun. So it's not like it's work. It's like you cook it for your family, uh, people that really love food.

**Dalia Colon:** That sounds amazing. So if we can go back to your time on Top Chef I know you, you didn't end up being the top, top chef on the show, but [00:05:00] it sounds like in life you pretty much are, you've done so many amazing things.

**Dalia Colon:** What's a lesson you learned from being on the show that maybe we can apply at home?

**Kenny Gilbert:** One, everyone has a perspective of food, right? So when you're cooking for judges, One, you're cooking because you want to showcase your ability and your skillset based on the challenges being set for you. They are challenges.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Some are straightforward and really easy. Some are meant to stump you and make you think, so you learn how to really troubleshoot even further. But really for me, I think what also help build is, uh, camaraderie with other people because you're competing against others, but you really are creating. There's times that you have to, uh, you're on that person's team.

**Kenny Gilbert:** There's times that you're con, you know, and you're always competing against others. And there's times when all of a sudden that person number is your teammate now becomes a person that you have to compete against and try to beat. And at the end of the day, you leave it, you [00:06:00] know, it's not personal. You do your best and ultimately, you, you know, you try to put that bur that perfect bite in front of the judge.

**Kenny Gilbert:** So it's just the ups and downs of cooking. For people, some people that you've never met before, like it's like you would in a restaurant and then hopefully that they enjoy what you present even though they have different cultural backgrounds.

**Dalia Colon:** Speaking of different cultural backgrounds, we gotta talk about your new cookbook, which just came out in April, right?

**Kenny Gilbert:** April 11th, it dropped. Yeah,

**Dalia Colon:** so congratulations. It's called *Southern Cooking Global Flavors*. What was the inspiration for that? You talked about cooking all these different global cuisines for Oprah, and then you've got the chicken restaurant. We're both from Cleveland. So first of all, thank you from being from Cleveland.

**Dalia Colon:** Where are you from in Cleveland?

**Kenny Gilbert:** Originally in Euclid. Greenbrier Commons, which is near Georgetown. Really close to Richmond Heights. Yeah. And then I lived in, uh, Richmond Gardens when I went to U Senior High School.

**Dalia Colon:** I'm also from the east [00:07:00] side, a little farther east. Um, Orange High School, go Lions. So how does a boy from Cleveland end up, you've cooked in the James Beard house, you've cooked in all these swanky resorts.

**Dalia Colon:** I don't even have time to mention all of them. Tell me about that journey.

**Kenny Gilbert:** So that journey started with the, uh, you know, going to culinary school in Pittsburgh. Got my degree there. I did my apprenticeship with the Ritz-Carlton Company, and I was at the Ritz-Carlton New Island in North Florida. My mom is from St. Augustine. She had, you know, six brothers and sisters. My uncle, who's like my second dad. Basically, I was looking for an apprenticeship site and he suggested I go to the Ritz Carlton. I applied, I made it. And I really feel like you, my apprenticeship, uh, for the Ritz Carlton really was the start of everything.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Was not the place you work was the people you work with. Working for the Ritz Carlin Company and putting myself in a position of working with people from all around the world is where I basically gained that [00:08:00] experience of global cuisine. You know, my first chef, I worked under the Gommage, a chef, the sous chef by trainer, all from Malaysia.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Uh, another trainer that was Mexican, another trainer that was from, uh, from Egypt. So when you're working in an environment like that, you're 18 years old, you're learning about the people and their culture, uh, around the rep. And so, you know, the first culinary competition I ever did was for the American Culinary Federation competition in Orlando.

**Kenny Gilbert:** So my chef, Roy Coup was actually training me. Uh, we would work 10, 12 hours a day and then stay in the kitchen and then train for another

two or three hours for this competition. So some days it was like 15, 16 hour days, and then we would leave, pack up, and then go down to Orlando and compete. Working very closely with the chef.

**Kenny Gilbert:** You know, I learned about his mental toughness, um, his discipline, you know, all of his experiences from the time he was a young chef working on cruise ships and working all over Southeast Asia and the world. And then he brought that he, he know, and he basically [00:09:00] fed me with his skillset. I learned from him and how to apply into my cooking.

**Dalia Colon:** How do you train for a cooking competition?

**Kenny Gilbert:** You have different rules for the competition. And the American Culinary Federation, everything is very, very tight-knit. It's all about, you know, cleanliness, organization, uh, your knife skills, all the classics in terms of your cuts and cooking technique. Um, and so the way you practice is whatever dish you're coming up with for that particular competition, you end up putting yourself in a time limit situation like you would for that competition.

**Kenny Gilbert:** And say they tell you have a three hour cook, or you have a two hour cook. You start hitting your stopwatch and then you just go, and then you just cook and then you set yourself with a station with the general basic equipment that you're, you would have, and then you just keep testing yourself. And then you do that over and over again until you feel that you got the dish down to exactly what you wanna present it.

**Dalia Colon:** Like an athlete.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Yeah, absolutely.[00:10:00]

**Dalia Colon:** In your cookbooks, Southern Cooking Global Flavors, what are some examples of these mashups?

**Kenny Gilbert:** So we have a, um, a fish and grits chapter. Out of that chapter, you know, I show you how to make kind of my classic version of like, say a fried fish and grits and, you know, I mean, hot sauce, stuff like that. I have different variations of that based on different cultural influences.

**Kenny Gilbert:** So, like I did, I worked over in Barbados and their national dish is a Creole fish. Um, usually it's mahi mahi or, or flying [00:11:00] fish and it's served on Cou Cou. Cou Cou is a basically like an okra polenta, which we

would associate that as to basically very fine corn meal or semolina cook down that is actually has okra. You blanch okra in a salted water.

**Kenny Gilbert:** You pull the okra out, you're whisking your fine cornmeal until it gets nice and creamy. Then you fold the okra back into a little bit of garlic and some salt, and then you place your fish, which is cooked in a little thread, in a little egg batter, seared off, and then stewed and a little tomato sauce with like tomatoes and zucchini, and you finish off with, uh, margarine, a little lemon.

**Kenny Gilbert:** That in my mind is the equivalent of a fish and grits. But it's very indigenous to Barbados. We have another version where we're doing like a miso, honey glaze, Scottish salmon filet. It can be applied to any kind of fish, and we're serving that on bamboo rice grits, whereas like kind of the original grits out there, the original porridge was made with rice.

**Kenny Gilbert:** They, they had a lot more rice [00:12:00] fields throughout the south before they actually started doing corn. So you can cook the rice down and Chinese culture they consider to be like, it's called kanji. So you cook it till it's kind of broken and it's very soft. It's like a porridge consistency. Exactly the same thing as what we would do with corn, cooking in water and butter and salt.

**Kenny Gilbert:** But I apply that with the bamboo rice and we started with nice, you know, fermented black beans and charred bok choy and gochujang honey. So it kind of has those Asian flavors, but I consider that be like rice and horse as well, or ch uh, fish and grits as well.

**Dalia Colon:** That sounds so sophisticated, which I guess is the global part, but also comforting, which is the southern part you consider Florida the South?

**Dalia Colon:** I mean, we're both here. Neither one of us are from here. There's, there's tons of people from up north down here. So how do you think about that?

**Kenny Gilbert:** So I consider North Florida from the panhandle all the way to Jacksonville. I consider that state of south, that's really like South Georgia, south Alabama, east [00:13:00] of Louisiana, that those are all have those southern routes on those borders.

**Kenny Gilbert:** In my neck of the woods you know, there's a lot of transplants coming from, uh, South Carolina and Georgia live in North Florida. So like, for example, like the signature barbecue sauce that a lot of places will highlight in North Florida is a mustard base that's specifically coming from Carolina. There

are places that highlight the tomato base, but more people in the, in North Florida, it seems that they really enjoy the mustard base.

**Kenny Gilbert:** My mom being from St. Augustine. There's a huge Spanish influence from the Spaniards that settled there and kind of conquer that area. Uh, you have a lot of Native American, uh, culture because obviously the natives were there first with the, the immigration and the slave trade and whatnot have settled. A lot of the, the, the Southern influence is deep rooted there.

**Kenny Gilbert:** There's a mashup between the Spanish and Native American cultures, and so I really do feel it's considered the south very coastal, uh, obviously a lot of [00:14:00] shrimp, a lot of fish. Alligator frogs and deer, you know, a lot of that's all native to the area, so I feel like a lot of the foods that we're used to eating is because of that mashup.

**Dalia Colon:** Now, you briefly touched on barbecue. We could do a whole other conversation just on barbecue. I read that you got your first Weber grill when you were seven years old. Is that correct?

**Kenny Gilbert:** That's correct.

**Dalia Colon:** Okay. My son just turned seven last week and I can't imagine him even like holding a birthday candle, let alone a grill.

**Dalia Colon:** So do you have any advice for getting kids into grilling?

**Kenny Gilbert:** I think the general advice for kids eating and cooking in general is to start off young. Once you start going into eating soft foods like your puree, carrot, your, your peas, your apple sauce, that kind of stuff, it's okay to start introducing foods that actually have a little bit more flavor and spice, you know, in moderation, right?

**Kenny Gilbert:** So you wanna start developing a palette [00:15:00] early, and then when you're cooking in the kitchen, put yourself in a situation where it's sometimes, depending on how you cook. If you're a stressful cooker, it may not always work out with the kids in the in the kitchen, but my mom, we were always right there next to her.

**Kenny Gilbert:** She would pull out some pots and pans, we would bang on the pots and pans and stuff like that while she was cooking. And then by the time I was three years old, she taught me how to scramble eggs. She saw something

that I was interested in and then so she nurtured that. And so I think it's always really important to constantly nurture what you see that your kids have interest in.

**Kenny Gilbert:** For me, I didn't look at it as work. By the time I was seven years old, I'm literally, you know, I'm, I'm watching my dad at the time I was born, right? Watching him barbecue and grill on the weekends as a hobby and as a young boy watching his father, I was, you know, the whole idea was, Hey, what is your, what is your dad doing?

**Kenny Gilbert:** I wanna do exactly what he is doing. So when it came time to bring me out to, to the [00:16:00] grilling, he showed me how to make the little chimney of the, you know, Kingsford charcoal briquettes. Put some lighter fluid on there, step away, drop in a match, and lights. He told me how to say, you know, he said, okay, once the ashes out, meaning that the coals are getting white, you level it out, put your grate on top, let that grate get hot, and then all of a sudden it's like, take a hot dog.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Let's take the progress already cooked. Let's throw a hot dog on there. Uh, roll her around with long tongs. Once it gets to the, the cook level that you like, pull it off, put it on a bun and put some mustard on it, and there's your hot dog at that. I start off with those kind of things first, but that was easy.

**Kenny Gilbert:** And then it turned into, now let's patty, uh, some ground beef and season it up. Now let's put a hamburger on the grill. Do that a few times. Now let's put a pork chop on the grill. Now let's put the chicken on there. Now let's talk about the importance of how long it takes to cook the chicken and how long it takes to cook the pork.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Rotate around. This is how you base, is how you mop. And so he nurtured that in me because I had an interest because I was watching him.

[00:17:00]

**Dalia Colon:** Oh, that's good. It's like training wheels. Absolutely. So, so your training wheels are definitely off now. You're like flying through, you're, you're literally flying, you're sitting in an airport, you're flying.

**Dalia Colon:** So what's next for you? What is left that you wanna do?

**Kenny Gilbert:** I, I turned 50 this year, you know, so for me, as I've, you know, been blessed to be on this earth for these first 50 years, you know, my next 50 years, I really want peace and harmony, cutting out any kind of drama that, that



may have been in my life. And really focusing on the thing that makes me happy and cooking has always made me happy.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Developing people has made me happy. Um, and so I want to basically create the infrastructure in my life where things can incubate and continue to grow. I can still continue to be able to help and teach and develop, and then ultimately have the businesses that I put together. Work for me so that basically I can at some point retire, semi-retire in a sense where I'm not [00:18:00] having to be in a kitchen on the lawn, not that I have to be right now.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Uh, I'm still skilled enough and, and young enough to be able to do it, no problem. And so I will always continue to do that, but let my mind and then my experiences and me creating job opportunities work for me. And then make sure that, you know, guests are continuing to eat what I cook. They're enjoying it.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Spending time for the holidays with me, you know, at my restaurants is very important so that I can still continue those things that I've learned from, you know, you know, cooking with my parents. I can extend that through, uh, through, through the guests and, and my team.

**Dalia Colon:** Last question. What does your T-shirt say?

**Kenny Gilbert:** Oh, it says hardest worker in the room.

**Dalia Colon:** You definitely are. You've done so much. We didn't even get to talk about half of it. Chef Kenny, is there anything else you would like to mention?

**Kenny Gilbert:** You know, I'm just, uh, very appreciative of of, of everyone that's been buying my book and that patronizes the restaurants.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Uh, I'm honored to be able to do a podcast [00:19:00] like this and interviews and dinners, uh, around the country to be able to share my love for food. Well,

**Dalia Colon:** thank you so much. You make Ohio and Florida proud.

**Kenny Gilbert:** Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

**Dalia Colon:** Chef Kenny Gilbert owns Silkie's Chicken and Champagne Bar in Jacksonville.

**Dalia Colon:** He's also the author of Southern Cooking Global Cuisine. You can find his recipe for Thai Collard Green Salad on our website, the zest podcast.com. I'm Dalia Colon. 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 N P R network.