

# The Zest S9E17

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**Dalia Colon:** I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest.

**Dalia Colon:** Citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. This week, learn what a day in the life of a food writer is really like.

**Dalia Colon:** Food writer sounds like a dream job, and for Lauren Jackson, in many ways, it is. As eat and drink editor for Sarasota Magazine, Lauren spends her days marrying her culinary background with her passion for writing. But being a food writer is about more than enjoying free dinners on the company [00:01:00] dime.

**Dalia Colon:** Lauren recently joined me in the Zest studio at WUSF. For a conversation about what the job entails.

**Lauren Jackson:** It is fun and easy to go out to dinner for work, but I have to write every day. Every single day I have to push out content. And it's hard as a creative to make yourself be creative on a schedule. So every morning I get up at eight and I write about whatever I'm working on. And then the fun part comes in the afternoon or the evening, which is going out or meeting with chefs or whatnot.

**Dalia Colon:** Okay. Talk to me about getting up and writing every day. Writing is hard.

**Lauren Jackson:** Writing is hard. I work best under a deadline that I'm right about to miss. Okay, if I know that I'm gonna get in trouble, which I never, I don't get in trouble. My boss is amazing. But if I think I'm gonna get in trouble, [00:02:00] then I'm at my best.

**Lauren Jackson:** So I wish I was better at time management than I am, but I'm not. But if I'm in a panic, then I can get the words out. If I'm not in a panic, they just have to stew in my brain until they're ready to be put onto the page. But, If I'm in a panic, they're just like, free flow out and then I can get my first draft off to my editor.

**Dalia Colon:** So what was the last thing you wrote that made you panic?

**Lauren Jackson:** Michelin. I wrote it last week. It was six weeks of research and traveling and, because I couldn't do it all at once. I couldn't just eat, eat, eat three days in a row. It's hard to navigate that kind of scheduling. So it was six weeks of, Coming up to Tampa, staying in a hotel, because I wanted to evaluate some lodging options for our readers as well.

**Lauren Jackson:** Because your readers are mostly in Sarasota. Because our readership is Sarasota and Manatee counties. Which, you know, is just an hour, but if you're going to plan some fabulous food getaway, Why not stay at the addition for, you know, two nights? Okay, and [00:03:00] Sarasota has a very sort of luxurious population You know, there's there's some money to burn in Sarasota.

**Lauren Jackson:** So why not live fabulously and let them know if it's worth it so it's six weeks of you know, planning and researching and and And then I have to process what I ate, you know, I have to like think about the flavors and then I'm weaving the narrative in my head and then it's due tomorrow.

**Dalia Colon:** Oh my gosh. Okay, say more about that because the people are like, Oh, poor thing.

**Dalia Colon:** Let me get my tiny violin. She had to process what she ate. But it really is a different thing to like go out to dinner with your partner or for a friend's birthday and just have a good time and enjoy the food versus Taking it all in, and writing about it in a way that other people can feel. So how do you do that?

**Lauren Jackson:** If I can, I will take someone with me. I'll take my husband, or I'll take a friend who I know really understands food. [00:04:00] That I can sort of converse while I'm eating, talk about what I'm eating, pick it apart, just, I mean, down to its bases. Decide whether or not I think it's a successful dish. Conceptually, what makes it successful?

**Lauren Jackson:** Is it pulling salt, fat, acid, umami? Is there textural differences? So I'm not eating just, you know, what I'm eating. Something mushy without any sort of textural interest. When I dine, it's so different because I'm really sort of looking at it like a science. Here are these multiple components, are they being achieved?

**Lauren Jackson:** And, When I'm able to pick a dish apart like that, then I'm able to put it back together, narratively speaking, sort of. It helps me really process how the dish was made and what the purpose behind its presentation was. And it makes it more memorable, of course. And I've always [00:05:00] got my handy notebook and my poor husband just listens to me talk at him about what we're eating.

**Dalia Colon:** Give me an example.

**Lauren Jackson:** Oh, gosh. Let's see. When was the last time he and I went together? We went to Rocca and we had an agnolotti that was stuffed with salami and ricotta. And so I'm trying to figure out maybe what that ratio might be and we're talking about. What we think is successful about it the next course was a crab and lemon spaghetti and he thought it was too lemony and I wholeheartedly disagreed because I felt like the acid was cleansing your palate between bites so that you could really pull that crabby ness in every bite so that you didn't get palate fatigue and while he was having a different experience I was able to sort of Help him understand why he was wrong.

**Dalia Colon:** Wait, now, how can you be wrong? Because if I don't like something, I don't like it.

**Lauren Jackson:** Sure, if you don't like [00:06:00] something, you don't like it, but does that make it a bad dish? Okay. And that is the challenge of critique, is just because it's not, To my taste, like, I don't like beets. So he gave me a beet salad. We gotta talk.

**Lauren Jackson:** It doesn't mean it's a bad dish. It means I don't like beets. Right. But fundamentally, is it hitting all of the right notes? And fundamentally, while it was not his cup of tea, the specific dish, fundamentally, it was an expertly crafted dish. I mean, the thoughtfulness was there. I could understand what the chef was trying to achieve.

**Lauren Jackson:** Travis just wasn't pulling Sort of from that same knowledge base that I might have in that this is super successful. It's just you might not like it.

**Dalia Colon:** I can't get over palate fatigue. People are like, give me a job that gives me palate fatigue. What do you eat when you go home?

**Lauren Jackson:** Oh gosh, I eat like a kindergartner. I eat like an absolute, I, it's like [00:07:00] chicken nuggets from Publix, mashed potatoes out of a, like, microwave container. I just don't want to have to think about it.

**Dalia Colon:** Okay, so you don't even want anything too complex where it might turn on your brain to think, Is the breading on this chicken nugget balanced with the juiciness of the chicken breast?

**Dalia Colon:** Because then it's like you're at work.

**Lauren Jackson:** That's right. That's right, and I don't, I don't want that thoughtfulness behind what I'm eating if I'm not working, because I can't turn it off. If I'm out to dinner with friends, I'm still like picking my dish apart and, and then I'm wondering, is this experience that I'm having something that I might like to write about in the future?

**Lauren Jackson:** Would I want to come and revisit this in a professional capacity? If I am not dining out for work, I am not dining out. So do you enjoy dining out? I love it and I hate it. I hate it because I can't turn my brain off. And so I have this really uniquely distinct [00:08:00] experience compared to other diners because my entire education is in food.

**Lauren Jackson:** You know, you have to understand I went to culinary school. I studied nutrition and food science. I mean, everything I've ever done leading up to this moment has gotten me here. And so I think even if I weren't a food writer, I would still be having the same experience. So I like to dine out because it scratches that little special interest itch that, you know, I've built my entire life around, but it can be work.

**Lauren Jackson:** I have to be in the right mindset to even go out for fun.

**Dalia Colon:** Is this what you thought you would be doing at this point?

**Lauren Jackson:** I had no idea. I had no idea that I would be a food writer when I grew up. But you went to culinary school. I did. I thought I wanted to be a chef. And then I found out how much chefs make and how much they work.

**Lauren Jackson:** I don't like to work. I don't like to work at all.

**Dalia Colon:** Well, you work every day.

**Lauren Jackson:** I work every day, but I don't feel like I'm working.

**Dalia Colon:** You have palate fatigue.

**Lauren Jackson:** I have palate fatigue. Wah. I [00:09:00] don't feel like I'm working, and I work a lot, but it doesn't feel like it, because I'm, you know, I'm going out to dinner. And I really like to write.

**Lauren Jackson:** I really enjoy writing. It's, it's cool. I'm cathartic to just get all of these words that are jumbled around in my brain at all times. My brain is just always talking to itself and to just be able to sort of put it on a page and walk away from it is healing in a way. And it silences my mind for about five minutes.

**Dalia Colon:** And you're so good at it. Thank you. I will look at the page on the Sarasota Magazine website, your page with all of your writing. And I'm like, how does she come up with this stuff day after day after day? Because as you said, to sit down and force yourself to be creative, that's really hard. There was a writer, I forget if it was like Ernest Hemingway or one of those guys.

**Dalia Colon:** And he basically said, like, I write every time I'm inspired and I make sure I'm inspired every day. At the Two o'clock or whatever it is. Basically, like, sit your butt in that [00:10:00] chair and figure it out. So what advice do you have for people who want to be where you are? You, I know that you can't just say the food is delicious.

**Dalia Colon:** So how do you come up with new ways of describing food day after day?

**Lauren Jackson:** So the very first thing is you have to get resource materials and you have to get the Food Lover's Guide. It's this dense sort of dictionary of food terminology. And if you hear a food word you don't know, or you read a food word you don't know, you, you don't Google it.

**Lauren Jackson:** You, you get out your Food Lover's dictionary and you look up the word and something about that sort of mechanic movement of cracking open a book and reading it versus Googling it. solidifies it in your brain. And I've been doing that for 10 years, 15 years. Just every time I hear a word I don't know that pertains to food, I look it up in this little book.

**Lauren Jackson:** It's like muscle memory.

**Dalia Colon:** You said that when you went to the [00:11:00] Michelin star restaurant in Tampa, what was it called again? Koya. Koya. People asked you like, what are you doing? And you had to out yourself and say, okay, I'm a food writer. But normally when you go to the restaurants, are you incognito or do they know that it's you?

**Lauren Jackson:** I'm. largely incognito. I usually make the reservation under my husband's name and we don't have the same last name. And you can't tell by looking at me today, but I have big curly hair, big blonde curly hair, and I'm short. And so I'm, I'm easily sussed out when I walk in. It's, oh, there, there she is. There she is.

**Lauren Jackson:** And Sarasota's not a huge community. And Tampa doesn't know who I am because they do now. People aren't necessarily reading Sarasota Magazine, but I do. I try to be incognito and not let anybody know that I'm coming, but in that, but I also out myself because I've got my little notebook and I'm writing what I'm so that I can remember because I'll [00:12:00] write a description of a dish while I'm eating it and then revisit it in a week when I'm ready to sit down and write the piece and I've already written it.

**Lauren Jackson:** I'm like, Oh, well, that actually works. That doesn't sound half bad. I'm gonna go with my gut instinct, what I wrote initially.

**Dalia Colon:** What do you do if you just hate a restaurant?

**Lauren Jackson:** I don't write about it. Okay.

**Lauren Jackson:** I don't, I'm not in the business of jeopardizing someone else's business. Mmm, that's good. And? My community is a small community. It's not as small as it was when I was growing up, but it still is a small community, and [00:13:00] owning a restaurant is really hard.

**Lauren Jackson:** It's so hard. There's so many moving parts. There's so many facets. The margins are super slim, and I don't want to come in with this large readership and just destroy someone's livelihood. That sounds stupid. Like a terrible way to live. So if I go and I have a bad time, I don't write about it. I might send an email and say, Hey, it was here.

**Lauren Jackson:** Don't worry, but you did miss a mark here and there, you know, if you ever want to talk, I'd be happy to have a chat. I don't tell anybody

that I had a bad time. I don't tell anybody where I'm going so that nobody can be like, hey, you went to that restaurant the other night. How'd you like it? And then I'm, and then I hate it.

**Lauren Jackson:** I just don't want to, Badmouth someone else's business, but when they're killing it and they're executing and they've hit all those marks I want to scream from the mountaintops that they are crushing the game because it makes our community Better and more [00:14:00] valuable.

**Dalia Colon:** That's so generous of you. So where's the last place in Sarasota?

**Dalia Colon:** You shouted out a few Tampa restaurants Where's the last place in Sarasota you went that just crushed it?

**Lauren Jackson:** The last place I went in Sarasota that just crushed it, so Indigenous, is a James Beard nominated restaurant, I think 2016, and maybe 2015 or maybe it was 2017. Two years in a row, Chef Stephen Phelps, who is a long, long time friend of mine, who I actually worked for during COVID.

**Lauren Jackson:** When I found my little writer self, freelancer at the time, without clients, I went and worked with Steve at Indigenous. And then the other restaurant is Meliora. They are absolutely fabulous. Their chef, Drew Adams, is a talent that Sarasota is just now ready for.

**Dalia Colon:** Ooh, why do you say that?

**Lauren Jackson:** Well, our. Our community is growing rapidly, and when I was growing [00:15:00] up, it was all fish shacks and like, you know, grouper sandwiches, or it was continental 1970s food.

**Lauren Jackson:** It was that sort of dining scene. There was not a lot of creativity, and just in the last few years, the dining scene has exploded. There's a lot going on. There's a lot more adventurous food. There's a lot more global cuisine available. There's just a lot happening, and because we have pulled all of these transplants from around the country, they have brought their sophisticated pallets with them as well.

**Lauren Jackson:** And, you know, enter Drew over at Meliora, and he worked in D. C. and has this sort of sophisticated manner in which he prepares dishes. Because we've pulled this population, they're now, we're now ready for it. And before Drew, Steve was really one of the only games in over an indigenous that was doing really creative, outstanding.

**Lauren Jackson:** Food that makes you think.

**Dalia Colon:** Mmm, food that makes you [00:16:00] think. Did you always live in Sarasota, or did you leave and come back?

**Lauren Jackson:** I left for the obligatory decade. Okay, where'd you go? I went to Nashville and Charlotte, North Carolina, and then my last stop was in Fargo, North Dakota, which is where I met my husband, and I stayed, I was only supposed to be there for a year, and I stayed for like three and a half.

**Lauren Jackson:** And it was really cold. Yeah. And then I pitched a fit and I think I like screamed into the wind that I was from the beach. Into the wind! And we don't need to be living in the snow. And uh, he had his listening ears on that day. We moved home about six weeks later.

**Dalia Colon:** Good husband, good husband. Yeah. Oh my gosh. So what's it like being back now?

**Lauren Jackson:** It's really satisfying and joyful. Aw, joyful. I love my community. I love Sarasota. I have been there my entire life. We moved there when I was, I think, [00:17:00] six months old. And I think it was like 200, 000 people in the county when I was living there. And now we're pushing 500, 000 in Sarasota County.

**Lauren Jackson:** Manatee, our neighboring county, has, I think, in the 400 arena. So, you know, we're almost a million people in those combined counties. And we were a teeny tiny little beach community when I was growing up. So watching it grow and blossom, it, it just inspires joy every day.

**Dalia Colon:** Oh, I love that. Okay. And I know that when you were a teenager, I think you worked at Outback.

**Dalia Colon:** I did. And you wrote this beautiful piece, eulogizing it when it closed. So. Which Outback are we talking about? Because certain listeners are going to know the exact one. And then why did you want to write this love letter?

**Lauren Jackson:** I started working at the Outback when I was 15. Which one? The one on the South Tamiami Trail in Sarasota.

**Lauren Jackson:** It's just south of Stickney Point, which is where Siesta Key [00:18:00] is. And it was the busiest Outback. It was so busy. And it was at the



height of that chain restaurant, you know, early 2000s. We didn't have a lot of options. Outback was consistent. It was approachable. It was affordable. And people were losing their minds over it.

**Lauren Jackson:** And my My stepdad said, Oh, we give you so much and you don't, you don't contribute enough to the house. And I was, I was just like, okay, I'm going to go get a job. I'll pay for my own stuff.

**Lauren Jackson:** I'll pay the mortgage. Yeah. Okay. Right. Exactly. I'll pay the mortgage on the, on the beachfront house.

**Lauren Jackson:** And so I went, I worked at the Outback and I loved it. It was so fun. We had this great manager. His name is Tim Wong. And he was young, but he wasn't too young, and he treated us like, he treated us like [00:19:00] we were his kids, but not in a patronizing way. He kept us in line. And I was just, oh, I was just fascinated by the inner workings of a restaurant.

**Lauren Jackson:** I mean, immediately, it was like love, immediately, that this is how a restaurant works. Incredible. And I worked there until I left for school. And, um, So, 15, 16, 17, 18, you know, almost four years I was at the Outback, at that, that specific Outback, and then our culinary landscape shifted over the past two decades, and Outback's not as exciting anymore.

**Lauren Jackson:** The Bloomin Onion's not exciting anymore? I mean, I could eat a Bloomin Onion any day. It's the kookaburra wings for me. But they closed it, and, uh, they closed it a couple weeks ago. And I reached out to my editor and I said, I want to write about this. This place is so special to me and so many people and it got shared and I [00:20:00] mean, people were coming out of the woodwork that we had forgotten about sharing their experiences on social media and I'm not super active on social media.

**Lauren Jackson:** I'm more of a lurker, but this story really sort of brought everybody together and it was cool to to see how people that I didn't even know had worked at different outbacks around the world. The area, how it had shaped their lives as well. And, you know, we're talking about philanthropy consultants and CEOs, and we're talking about big people who have gone on to do really incredible things who contribute their sort of foundational organizational skills and success to having worked at an Outback Steakhouse when they were a teenager.

**Dalia Colon:** Wow. You guys need a reunion.

**Lauren Jackson:** We, we do. Right. I think you're right. I think we need to all go to Siesta Key and.

**Dalia Colon:** What's the drink? I don't know. Was there like a signature drink at Outback?

**Lauren Jackson:** It was called the Wallaby Darn.[00:21:00]

**Lauren Jackson:** It was like a Miami Vice, I think. What color? What color was it? It was like peach. Oh my gosh. It was a frozen daiquiri. I wasn't old enough to drink. So I don't know what it, I don't even know what it tasted like. Girl, let's get you one now.

**Dalia Colon:** So how do you reconcile the experience you had working at this sort of mediocre outback, don't, don't come for me, but I'm going to say mediocre, like chain restaurant versus what you do today, reviewing these Michelin starred, Restaurants.

**Lauren Jackson:** I mean, it's I get a question. I get asked a lot about different types of food and a lot of people who don't understand what I do think that I'm only eating at Michelin starred restaurants.

**Lauren Jackson:** And it's all about meeting a restaurant where they are. And so if you need the outback where it is, it's, you know, a chain steakhouse, but they're still consistent and it's still good. Like they're still crushing it. Yes. And then you go to a Michelin [00:22:00] restaurant. You're meeting them where they are. You have a little bit higher standard, but you can tell whether or not they're crushing it.

**Lauren Jackson:** But I couldn't have gotten to the Michelin without the Outback because it inspired me to learn. It inspired, I didn't grow up in a house that was food focused. My mom was great at nourishing us, but not a building flavors and or making pork chops. Um, they were always overcooked. Okay, Mom, turn this off.

**Lauren Jackson:** I'm sorry, Mom. I love you so much. But going to the outback and working there. is is how I learned to love the industry that I get to write about now. And and I, you know, went on to culinary school and I worked in fine dining both during and after culinary school. And I wouldn't have even been eligible for a position like that if I hadn't proven that I could work at an Outback for four years.

**Lauren Jackson:** Here I am, you know, a very young person, [00:23:00] and I've already got A job that I've had for four years under my belt. So clearly, I'm loyal. Clearly, I'm good at my job because they haven't fired me. So are we ready to take her on and train her so that she understands a more elevated approach to service? So really, I guess what I'm saying is I owe all of it to the Outback.

**Dalia Colon:** Oh, my gosh. Sponsor this podcast already. Wow. Okay. So you, you have mentioned a few times that you do have a culinary training. So we had to ask you for a recipe. You gave me a recipe for scallops. Tell me about that. You know, put on your food writer hat. So how would you describe that dish and that people can make it at home if they want?

**Lauren Jackson:** Oh, yeah. And that dish is super easy and was inspired by a trip that I took to Crystal River where I ate. Got the scallops myself, and that was really fun. That's the great thing about Florida. It was so cool. I mean, Florida is such a cool state, and I am such a fish. I you put me in the water. I'm so happy.

**Lauren Jackson:** So I harvest these scallops for a story, and [00:24:00] then I get to go home and make this dish. It's it's kind of like that. Spaghetti we talked about at Rocca, that it's got that lemony ness, this, it pulls that acid from white wine and lemon so that it keeps you from getting that palate fatigue, you know, acid is a palate cleanser, so, cause there's butter in it, there's a lot of butter in it.

**Lauren Jackson:** But it's very simple, you can put it together in about 15 20 minutes and that's how I like to cook. I like to cook food that tastes like it took all day and took maybe 30 minutes or less. And I wasn't even tasked with coming up with that recipe for the story, I was just so inspired by what I had done that I pulled sort of an old culinary school recipe out of my hat and reconfigured it with, it was an old, like, clams recipe and reconfigured it with scallops, which of course are a lot sweeter than clams, but it [00:25:00] worked really well, and it's easy.

**Dalia Colon:** I love that. Okay, because you got to get back to your fancy dining or your Publix chicken nuggets

**Lauren Jackson:** or your Publix chicken nuggets or, you know, just like not having to think too much. And don't get me wrong. I have those days where I get up or I get home from work and I need to create and I need to make something really complicated.

**Lauren Jackson:** And I'll do it, but it's like once a month.

**Dalia Colon:** Well, because writing is creative. Right. And cooking is creative. So it can be kind of draining. It can be. Yeah. It can be. At the end of the day, you just want to like make a PB& J or something. Yeah.

**Lauren Jackson:** Yeah. That's true.

**Dalia Colon:** This was so much fun. Thank you. Thanks for coming all the way up here.

**Dalia Colon:** Lauren Jackson is Eat and Drink Editor for Sarasota Magazine. And she told me she and her husband are big NPR listeners. Love that. Lauren shared her recipe for Florida scallops with lemon butter spaghetti. Find it on our website, the zest [00:26:00] podcast. com. And now I have to fact check myself. The quote about being a disciplined writer, I looked it up and it's actually attributed William Faulkner, not Ernest. Hemingway. It goes like this: "I only write when I am inspired. Fortunately, I am inspired at nine o'clock every morning." Unquote. I'm Dalia Colon. I do not write at nine o'clock every morning, but I do produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF. Copyright 2024.

**Dalia Colon:** This is for you, Lauren, part of the NPR Network.