

The Zest S9E18

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Dalia: 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. Quick reminder to please rate The Zest wherever you're listening to this podcast. It helps other listeners to find us and we really appreciate it.

Dalia: Now onto today's show, more than three quarters of head chefs in U.S. Restaurants are men, according to the Census Bureau. But Olivia Giesler has forged her own path in the male dominated world of kitchen leadership, and she's doing it at one of Tampa's most buzzed about restaurants.[00:01:00]

Dalia: The Pearl Restaurant opened just last year on downtown Tampa's Water Street. Now, for those of you unfamiliar, This is the hottest street in town with all the restaurants you want to be at. This is where you take your friends from out of town. This is where you go before or after a Lightning hockey game.

Dalia: You get the picture. So, The Pearl opened just last year, but it's already garnering praise. And it's even listed in the newest Michelin guide to Florida restaurants. The Pearl's success is due in large part to its executive chef, Olivia Giesler. I recently stopped by the gastropub to chat with chef Olivia about how she's forging her own leadership style in the kitchen, how her Midwestern roots fostered her love of hospitality and how we can all cook smarter at home.

Chef Olivia: The Pearl is where Locadale and Water [00:02:00] Street cross from Amalie Arena. And we are, it's kind of got a nautical feel with The Pearl. So we're like a jam in the making, but we have lots of gastropub influence. So imagine like a bunch of chefs getting around and creating like their dream menu, like showing a bunch of different techniques, but really craveable food.

Chef Olivia: So we have everything from raw oysters, baked oysters, but then we have Southern classic with fried chicken. Made in house and the house made cinnamon roll or sticky bun and then we have a hanger steak with a kimchi fried rice and a fried egg on top because what chefs don't like fried rice with the extra fried egg on top.

Chef Olivia: So it's just real fun and cool techniques, real craveable food approachable, you know, for every day. You can just come as you are and enjoy everything.

Dalia: I know that The Pearl was recently recognized by the Michelin Guide. How does that affect you as a chef? Does that change the clientele who are coming in or their [00:03:00] expectations?

Dalia: Does that change the way you do things in the kitchen?

Chef Olivia: So for us, it just puts a major spotlight on us. And it's really key because everyone knows the, you know, Michelin star ratings and the guide. So a lot of people were reaching out to us. So it makes all of our guests laser focused on every single detail.

Chef Olivia: So they have expectations of being a fine dining restaurant and white tablecloth and that hospitality. You know, even though we're a casual restaurant, their expectations are through the roof. So everything has to be perfect because that's their expectations and they're just laser focused on it. Like, well, so and so mentioned you, so you guys better be good.

Dalia: Okay. So you're located on Water Street, as you said, by Amalie Arena. There's a hockey game tonight. I believe it feels like there's always a hockey game. So you've got a lot of foot traffic and you're on Water Street, which is like this up and coming dining area. I, uh, I had a friend. visit recently with her fiance and the fiance has traveled all over the world and he said, Oh, this could be Dubai.

Dalia: I [00:04:00] feel like I'm in Dubai right now. And I was like, so what's your overall impression of Tampa's dining scene and where do you see the pearl fitting into that?

Chef Olivia: It's really cool because this Water Street, like, I think two years ago none of this was here. None of the restaurants were here. It's all brand new.

Chef Olivia: So it was, the museum was here and the cruise ship. So it's really, you know, there's a place to live, multiple places to eat. So it's a place where you can walk around and poke your head around and check out a lot of stuff. So it's just, it's great because it's kind of created this neighborhood and you can have a block party.

Chef Olivia: We, they just did a Taste of Water Street where a bunch of restaurants were having samples of either cocktails or beverages and people bought tickets and a passport and were able to walk around and check out a bunch of stuff. So that's really. A cool fun environment where you don't get really anywhere else in Tampa where you can just have a block party experience of people walking around and checking out new stuff.

Chef Olivia: So it's great to have neighbors and everyone else. So

Dalia: yeah, a lot of Tampa Bay is not walkable, [00:05:00] but Water Street definitely is. Yeah, the dogs and the kids and people eating ice cream cones and all that fun stuff.

Dalia: Are you from Tampa?

Chef Olivia: I'm not. I'm from Columbus, Ohio.

Dalia: Yeah, probably. O H I O. Bocas? Yeah, right.

Dalia: Okay, we'll We'll geek out about that later. So, tell me about growing up and how you got into cooking.

Chef Olivia: I grew up in Columbus, so that's central Ohio, and then I have family in Chillicothe, so it's like an hour south, so we have a big family, so us getting together would have, you know, for Thanksgiving or Christmas, like, going to one of our cousins houses, so we'd all have potluck style, because there's so many of us, so it's always fun.

Chef Olivia: Bringing either pies or cookies or side dishes. So it's a big family environment and always coming into each other's home. So that's kind of, I think, where hospitality started for me and I didn't know it. So the food and being around the family and welcoming each other over and always have, one of my aunts would always, never lock her door.

Chef Olivia: So [00:06:00] everyone was always welcome in the neighborhood. But there was always, Coffee brewing, sodas in the fridge, popsicles for the kids, some coffee cake on the counter. So there's always food and beverages and snacks and everyone was always welcome too. Socialize and, you know, put their feet up and relax and just be part of that.

Chef Olivia: So that's kind of where it, like, I know it just seems natural, like, that's part of what I just have to do. It's like, oh, very Midwestern of you. Yeah, so it's just, this is what it is.

Dalia: Like, it's not enough to just take care of my family. I have to be ready at all times for guests.

Chef Olivia: Yeah, you want to make everyone always feel welcome and great.

Chef Olivia: And that's what's so natural about being in this industry is it's hospitality and it's, Welcoming everyone and making them feel good and appreciated from everyone working and learning to just get to say hi and recognize guests that are in and spending time here, what's going on, what's a special occasion and that's what really feels great when you just make that moment for make them feel great and just, you know, appreciate their time that they're spending with us.

Dalia: I like that because there are [00:07:00] restaurants where they act like they're doing you a favor. Right. Yeah. Or you, you ask for another glass of water, and the server acts like he can't be bothered.

Chef Olivia: Like, who do you think you are? It's like, no, it's like Like, you work here. They're, it's so hard to get here, like, you have to Park, you have to, you know, there's traffic.

Chef Olivia: So just the fact that made everyone made an effort to come here, want to go to the pearl, look us up and like, they're spending their afternoon with us or their evening with us or their celebrations. Like, you know, just appreciate them and just be genuine and, you know, be honest with that and want to make sure they have an experience and it's effortless and they just feel great.

Dalia: So that's like the service side. And then on the food side, does your midwestern background at all translate to the food that you're making here at the Pearl?

Chef Olivia: The food, I'm just with Cameron Mitchell restaurants. So part of the team is just really learning and coaching the teammates. So it's, we have such a, you know, variety [00:08:00] of everything.

Chef Olivia: It's welcoming for everyone, which is really nice. So you can have like, A great seafood or in our catch that we rotate or a shellfish tower or you

can enjoy the burger or enjoy a Cuban sandwich, but we'll confit the pork and how so we make the pickles and house for it, which is really cool. So you get to see those techniques.

Chef Olivia: So it's a really nice restaurant to. Learn and educate and teach new up and coming like culinarians because you get, we dehydrate, we confit, we braise, we pickle, we fried chicken. So all these techniques are here and we make our own stocks in house and make our own chowder. So it's all from scratch. So it's a great kind of like learning environment, which I fell in love with.

Chef Olivia: I'm like, Oh wow. It was like, you know, magical seeing how a sauce is made. It's just lots of fun. I couldn't get enough of it. So I just want to spread it and like share it with everyone.

Dalia: I love that. And it's an open kitchen, so even the guests can see a little bit of that magic.

Chef Olivia: Yeah, that's fun. They'll walk by and like, oh, am I in the kitchen?

Chef Olivia: Like, oh, chef call. I'm like, oh, I'm like, get out of here. Like, you're like, [00:09:00] thank you. Because you never know who's behind you, but everyone's like seeing inspecting and like pointing like, oh, what's that? What's that? I'm like, oh, that's our fish and chips. And they get excited just seeing it and feeling the flow of the kitchen and being able to peek in that little wonder.

Chef Olivia: So it's, you know, it's fun. And Play off the energy of the restaurant and the energy, the restaurant gets energy from, you know, the kitchen to humming and moving. But you hear people gearing up for a game and it starts to get, you start hearing people laugh and I'm like, Oh, you know what that means? Like we're gonna get real busy real quick.

Dalia: So be ready. Oh, yeah, be ready when, when that third period ends, the Lightning game, probably before and after.

Chef Olivia: Well, it starts to get, people are chilling at the oyster bar, starts to get loud. I'm like, okay, the sun's going down. I'm like, it's happening. So

Dalia: it's hockey time. Yeah, almost. So when people are peeking into the kitchen, do they know that you're the chef?

Dalia: I read that only about 12 percent of executive chefs are female. So what was your experience coming through the ranks?

Chef Olivia: I just kind of had to learn how to, [00:10:00] how to create my management style. So that, so I had a lot of great mentors and they're still my mentors. So having that trust was really key, but I can't manage and coach.

Chef Olivia: Lead the team the same way as like different male skins, just because, you know, it's different. When I first was managing and beginning into it, I was 24 years old. So how a 24 year old woman is perceived and like leading and coaching a team, you have to adapt and adjust and it, you know, the perception can be very different.

Chef Olivia: So I had to learn that and grow with that and kind of create my own style, but it's great because there's. Many other chefs that are females and it's not just, you know, I just pick and choose from a little bit what works for me or what What works for different people, you know, I'm not a six foot giant chef like a lot of my mentors were like were huge and you know, they're naturally intimidating walking into the room or naturally commanding.

Chef Olivia: So I have to create that leadership and [00:11:00] that, you know, commanding in a different way. So you got to pay attention to the body language and everything else that you're doing.

Dalia: How do you do that? Because men, I'm generalizing, like to tell women how to do things. And the way that a man does something wouldn't work.

Dalia: You know, there are women who like to tell men how to do things too. It doesn't go over very well that way. You can't do it the same way.

Chef Olivia: It doesn't come off the same way. And that's, you know, I'm, I'm a coach and I have to, you have to listen a lot and you have to Here where people coming from, because everyone has like different backgrounds and different experiences and different perceptions.

Chef Olivia: So you have to listen and how I speak and guide one person works very different. So I have to adapt for each person and I have to listen and learn. I'm like, okay, how do they want to learn? Is it their career or the young student where they at? So listening and understanding like each person and who they are and where they're coming from and what they want.

Chef Olivia: Okay. And what they need from me is really the key. It's not about me, [00:12:00] it's about, I'm here for the whole team, I'm here for the whole guests, and that's my role is to support all of them. It's not, it's not about me, it's about all of them and where they want to go and where they want to be, and I'm just here to make sure they have everything that they need.

Dalia: Kitchens have sort of a militaristic style of ranking and leadership, and even the word chef, doesn't it just mean chief? So it's like, you're the boss.

Chef Olivia: You have to because you have to know who a point of contact is and it's like who's in charge and what's next and like That's important because it still needs to be organized, but you just have to know who's in point.

Chef Olivia: You know, Alex is our general manager, so everything has to go through him. And you know, that's the way, cause otherwise like you can't have five people running the same ship. It doesn't work that way. So you just have to know who's in charge and what's organized and you have to have that. So.

Dalia: Are there any advantages to being a female chef?

Dalia: It seems like you have to be a little bit more creative to maintain that authority, but you know what works for different people. It's almost like, um, you know, with my kids, I know that the way I talk to [00:13:00] my daughter has to be different than the way I talk to my stepdaughter, which has to be different than the way I talk to my son because We're all individuals.

Dalia: Are there any advantages to having that broad female perspective?

Chef Olivia: I don't know. I'm not a guy, so I don't know. I just, I just do what, you know, what makes sense for me, and I always try and learn and challenge myself. So, you know, I try to be emotionally in tune, but at the same time, that's a disadvantage too, because I can get too attached and too personal, and I have to, like, Take a step back.

Chef Olivia: I'm like, no, it's like, I'm, I'm chef Olivia right now. I'm not Olivia at home right now. And you know, when I'm at work, I'm at work. And when I'm at home, I'm at home. I can't treat my daughter like I'm at work. That doesn't go over very well. She needs me to be mom when I'm at home. So

Dalia: how old is your daughter?

Chef Olivia: She's 12. She's awesome. So she loves getting her food and cooking and keeping her busy and, you know, just treating her and listening to her. So it's, it's really awesome. [00:14:00]

Dalia: I don't know if you find this, but when I'm out in the evening, either for work or for fun, a lot of times people will ask me like, who's watching the kids. And I don't know that they're asking my husband that. So have you noticed any of those sorts of double standards?

Chef Olivia: A little bit, but it's just, you know, you figure out.

Chef Olivia: You have a family, and like, people, people ask that, but they don't know. My husband has the same thing. We met in the industry, so we take cues from each other and we support each other. It's like, well, you know. [00:15:00] He can go on vacation travel. I'm going to go on vacation. And it's because we've got each other supporting us.

Chef Olivia: Just, I don't know. It's all I, it's all I know. My mom was a nurse, so she's always worked. So dad was always the one home and taking care of us because she would work night shifts. So it's not, it's not foreign to me. It's just natural to have two working parents and that support each other and take care of business.

Chef Olivia: And like we're kids, we're resilient. We'll survive, you know, whether it's, Babysitters or grandparents or one parent or the other, depending on who's working, is like, they'll survive. They'll be fine.

Dalia: How many kids do you have?

Chef Olivia: I just have my one daughter.

Dalia: Okay. What does she like to eat? What do you make at home for her?

Chef Olivia: It depends. It depends on what she's in the mood for. Sometimes it's pasta. Sometimes she was sauteing up enoki mushrooms or Cutting up dragon fruit because she thought it was really pretty, or she'll make her own scrambled eggs and pancakes. So it's, you know, what she's learning and what she's curious about.

Chef Olivia: We made pesto together. You [00:16:00] never know. Sometimes she's fussy and other times she'll eat and try whatever she wants, so I don't push it. Our daughters sound like the same person. She likes sushi, so she's a maniac.

Raw salmon only, not cooked salmon. I'm like, okay, whatever you want. My daughter tried to make kimchi in a pickle jar.

Chef Olivia: Oh god. She's been eating kimchi, I'm like, where, where did this Okay, whatever.

Dalia: I know, I love kimchi, but if you don't know what you're doing and you're making it in my fridge, it's not a pretty thing. It's not a pretty set.

Chef Olivia: She didn't grow up eating spicy. Now she's like curious about certain things with spiciness.

Chef Olivia: So

Dalia: nice. And it's fun because they see all this stuff online now.

Chef Olivia: Yeah. She's trying it. She's like, Oh, I saw it on tik TOK. I'm like, okay, whatever is fun for you.

Dalia: Oh yeah. Totally. Can we try this? I saw it on TikTok. Oh, the new thing is candy salad. Has she made a candy salad?

Chef Olivia: No.

Dalia: It's exactly what it sounds like. You buy, your face. It's exactly the face. That's the face I made when I heard about it. You just buy a bunch of candy and dump it in a bowl. Disgusting. But what would you tell 24 year old Olivia? What do you know now that you wish [00:17:00] you had known when you started out?

Chef Olivia: Just trust yourself and, you know, keep learning and knowing that you'll get through it.

Chef Olivia: Like. You're always going to have like those challenging shifts and there's always going to be those tough things, but usually those tough moments is being uncomfortable is usually you're, you're flexing those muscles, just like in the gym and where you're working out. If, if you're working out and you're not sweating and you're not uncomfortable, you're usually nothing happening.

Chef Olivia: So with work or home or anything like that is like, if I'm. Being challenged and I'm feeling comfortable and I had a little bit of doubt, I'm probably getting stronger and I'm learning from it and I'm like knowing that is like it's okay to be uncomfortable and that's probably a good thing and that means I'm pushing myself and I'm evolving and growing and like those tough moments make you stronger and fortify you and you know, whether it's sports or um, Anything else that we're doing, that's usually what, like, you're just building those layers and building that resilience and flexibility.

Dalia: How do you do that at work? How do [00:18:00] you push yourself in the kitchen?

Chef Olivia: It's taking what guests we can or having different parties or Doing different events, we got to participate in food fight and be a part of that team because there was St. Pete vs. Tampa Bay. So just doing different volunteer events or off sites or, you know, those different events and saying yes to that.

Chef Olivia: It's, you know, those charitable events for like hunger. Yeah. Raising money. You know, we've, we've only been, we've been open just over a year. So those events are what challenge us in different ways because now it's an off site and it's a different layer and what menu we're going to do. What are we going to take with us?

Chef Olivia: There's always different opportunities. So finding ways to say yes and making that stuff happen and going above and beyond is like, that's what's challenging. Like, okay, we're saying yes to something, whether it's making a Raven fan out of a guest or, you know, they'd be like, Hey, I want some pasta or mac and cheese.

Chef Olivia: Like, well, let's go right next door. Go get some pasta. Cause we don't have pasta on our menu. But we don't have pasta on our menu. So I was like, [00:19:00] how can we say yes? And how can we make those momos for people? Like, that's how we, you know, learn and grow and adapt. Like, okay, we can't make that happen. We can't make a vegan dish happen.

Chef Olivia: Or we can have tofu in house or, you know, there's different things we can come up with and take care of guests. Is there something you've been wanting to try? I'm always asked like a favorite dish or that stuff. I'm always just, I really like really fresh food and like letting the Product shine for itself.

Chef Olivia: Or if it's like a fresh fruit or kale or a vegetable, it's kind of nice when stuff's not manipulated too much. And it's just speaks for itself or like,

you know, a beautiful trumpet mushroom or like sometimes like just the light finesse of it, or if it's just a piece of fish and it's just speaks for itself really, you know, is the best thing or what I really enjoy.

Dalia: What advice do you have for people at home? Because my friends and I have been talking a lot lately about how we get into these dinner ruts, we have the same couple of meals on rotation, we don't want anything too complicated because if I'm cooking it on a Tuesday [00:20:00] night, I want to know that it's gonna work.

Dalia: Right. So, what's like a baby step that I could take?

Chef Olivia: My thing is like I'll go grocery shopping and then I'll cook one day and then I won't touch those vegetables for like a week and then they're not fresh anymore. So, I try and like, okay, what can I freeze or have cut up and prepared that will freeze okay.

Chef Olivia: So, I'll get a bunch of bananas and cut and freeze those. So, I can make a smoothie or I can have something easy access or even with chicken or that stuff or I'll make a pesto. And then I'll make a big batch of it and then freeze it into ice cubes so that I can have a quick sauce, or I'll make a big batch of gnocchi and then freeze them so I can have a fresh pasta, you know, quickly, so I can have just like a little bit of ambiguity that way, so I'm not just like stuck, you know, having to start from scratch, or I'll chop garlic or make garlic oil, or a stock, or if I get a roast chicken, I'll Save those bones and make a stock with it.

Chef Olivia: So I just try and you [00:21:00] know Utilize everything or pre plan or just have like some key ingredients that can adapt in different ways.

Dalia: I love that I have recently started saving my veggie scraps in the freezer. And then when I have enough I'm gonna try to make another

Chef Olivia: There's bone broth now and all this stuff. I'm like, it's chicken stock. What is happening? I'm like

Dalia: It's 2024. It's bone broth now. It's chicken stock. I'm like, what is happening? I've been making this for a hundred years. I'm like, what is going on here? Everything old is new again.

Chef Olivia: Yeah, but you can freeze that stuff. And that, you know, can add a lot of flavor, but freeze it in like an ice cube or like portion.

Chef Olivia: So you don't have to have this. whole big batch, or you don't have to have the whole veggie stuff up, so you can just, like, pull it out of the fridge, and be like, okay, just need just this for today, so you don't have to go to the store and do the whole work every time.

Dalia: Yes, I made some chili the other, like, a month ago, and then a couple days ago, I took some out that I had put in little individual portions, and it's almost like a gift to your future self.

Dalia: Yeah. Or I have done the [00:22:00] pesto, and then taking it out, and you can boil pasta in 10 minutes. And so I'm like, thank you, Dalia, from last week. You did me a huge favor.

Chef Olivia: Yeah, so you don't have to have everything. So I'll buy garlic and, like, slice it up and make a garlic oil. So then, you know, I have that flavor ready to go, because I'll use that whether I'm sautéing up peppers or, like, making sausage and peppers or chicken thighs or grilling or what have you.

Chef Olivia: So that helps. Buy a bunch of chicken and marinate it and freeze it or whatever, you know, vegetables or make spaghetti squash because I love spaghetti squash, so I'll cook a couple of those, but I don't need all of that, and then I'll, you know, just pull it out of the freezer when I, when I want it, so it's already roasted and ready to go, so.

Dalia: Yeah, that sounds very midwestern of you. It's just, full circle!

Chef Olivia: It's just, you know, it's easy. Like, I mean, I get home at night, so I'm gonna be eating at midnight. But that's what it is. Like, okay, I'm gonna have a fried egg right now, so it's okay.

Dalia: Yeah, it's okay. And I'm sure your fried egg is fancy with, like, special oils and all kinds of [00:23:00] delicious, oh, you're nodding.

Dalia: No! Shaking your head no.

Chef Olivia: It'll just be, like, a fried egg with rice and some, you know, whatever else. So sometimes the simple is just the best.

Dalia: Yeah, I agree. Is there anything else you wanted to tell us about yourself or about The Pearl that we haven't touched on yet?

Chef Olivia: No, it's just great. It's a part of Cameron Mitchell Restaurants.

Chef Olivia: I started with them when I was 18 as an apprentice in high school. And I've gotten to travel all over the country with them and it's just finding great mentors and great team members. And they've always been there for me and they believed in me. And I just try and pass that on to the team and everyone else.

Chef Olivia: And that's kind of the key thing. It's like, don't forget to Appreciate and believe in yourself and finding those great people around you that you can learn and grow from no matter what career industry, you know, environment you want to be and just take that everywhere and just, you know, if you learn a little bit, just learn it and then also spread that kindness, you know, always move forward.

Dalia: Okay, speaking of spreading kindness and moving forward, who [00:24:00] is another Florida chef who you think people should know about? Maybe someone whose food you admire or someone you think is not getting the attention that they deserve?

Chef Olivia: I love Chef Jason over at Ocean Prime. We've known each other for many years.

Chef Olivia: So he's tremendous and we work together at that restaurant and then also Chef Gia Tran with Zukku San. So they have sushi in a couple places over up close to the outlet malls. They have Otto, I think at Armature Works Works. And then like Crate, so they have a couple different places, but always done fresh and fun stuff and Having that kind of community, being able to talk to each other is like always key.

Chef Olivia: It's like, you guys doing good? It's like, yeah, we're good.

Dalia: Aww. You're good. Well, you're definitely good. You're better than good here.

Chef Olivia: Yeah. Thank you guys.

Dalia: This is fun. That was Executive Chef Olivia Giesler of The Pearl Restaurant on Downtown Tampa's Water Street. She shared the restaurant's recipe for Harbor Salad.[00:25:00]

Dalia: It's got shellfish, bacon, ricotta, avocado, I mean, is your mouth watering? It's amazing. You can find that recipe on our website, thezestpodcast.com. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria

Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF. Copyright 2024. Part of the NPR Network.