The Zest S11E10

Steve Phelps: [00:00:00] In the ocean, it's like a pie. You could take a few slices out, just don't eat the whole pie. So we have to really keep, keep a few slices in that pie.

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 going heavy on the seafood and learning how to enjoy it more responsibly.

If you eat seafood, then Chef Steve Phelps wants you to know something like, actually know something about what you're consuming. That striped bass at the grocery store, seafood counter, where did it come from? The tuna melt that you ordered for lunch from your favorite diner, how was that fish caught?

Steve is co-owner and head chef of Indigenous since he opened the restaurant in 2011. It's become one of the most sought after dinner reservations in Sarasota. And Steve was a two time [00:01:00] semi-finalist for the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef South Award. Those are some serious credits. Now he has also stepped into a role as one of the area's most vocal advocates for responsible seafood consumption.

I was first introduced to Steve during a screening of the PBS docuseries *Hope in the Water,* and of course I had to have him on the pod. So I met up with him at Indigenous in Sarasota to do a deep dive. I'm so sorry, I could not resist that pun about how restaurant goers and home cooks can enjoy seafood more responsibly.

In our conversation, Steve shares why he's such a vocal aquaculture advocate, the biggest threats to ocean life, how he and the team at Indigenous educate seafood consumers, questions to ask when you dine out or buy seafood at a market under the radar seafood, you should try and a whole lot more. So here's my conversation with chefs [00:02:00] Steve Phelps.

Steve Phelps: My name's Steve Phelps. I am the co-owner and head chef of Indigenous Restaurant here in Sarasota.

Dalia Colon: So I wanna start by asking, what does seafood sustainability mean to you?

Steve Phelps: Sure. I, I think that's a word that we're abusing a little bit right now when we talk about seafood. So we're trying to kind of get away from that.

And to me, it means that we are not ruining a resource that is available to us naturally, organically. We have an opportunity to do responsible sourcing, which is why I like to really kind of use a little bit more. Because I think if you look at marketing and advertising, people throw that word sustainable in and it's like.

Really, what did you do with it? But to me right now, we have a lot of issues globally that when we're talking about sustainable seafood, we need to know that a species that we're gonna use will exist for a long time and is not gonna be threatened. Whether that be overfishing, pollution, [00:03:00] what have you. We need to know that that fish will sustain its life and go, which is why.

I'm so active in a lot of fishing programs where we're trying to protect overfishing, but also a big advocate for aquaculture, which is gonna make a lot of these species live on and live on.

Dalia Colon: Okay. You mentioned overfishing. What are some of the other threats to seafood being sustainable?

Steve Phelps: Pollution for sure is one of the biggest ones.

I think that study's getting a little more evident since we've had so many oil spills and natural disasters. We're talking about pharmaceuticals in the water. We're talking about. PCBs in the water. We're talking about different plastic pollutions that are really starting to develop in different areas and you know, we're researching fish and doing autopsies on these fish and finding these chemicals and plastics and poisons and everything that, that we really need to be careful.

So pollution is huge. Overfishing is huge. And then, [00:04:00] you know, we've got this climate increase, that 1.2 degrees means that that Spanish mackerel that used to swim all the way up to Tallahassee may not make it this year because the water freaked them out and you didn't want to go that far. So there's a lot of challenges involved in that.

And you know. I think our, our choices that we make these days in purchasing seafood and stuff is gonna help with the impact of that.

Dalia Colon: All right. I'm glad you brought that up. Let's talk about our choices, because everybody listening wants to know which seafood is the most sustainable. How should I shop for seafood if I don't have a restaurant?

Steve Phelps: That's the question we get daily and it's great that we've got tools and resources for our, our consumers to, to get involved with it, especially our guests. I, I've realized over the past few years that the interaction with our clientele has gotten great. Where we like to be an educational restaurant, I want my server to know what I know about the species that they're going to eat.

And so we try to make sure that [00:05:00] that education goes to them. But right now, I think that the fact that we're trying to avoid the fish that's so common. That's being overfished in, in Florida. It's group or group or group or everywhere you go, but that's actually very threatened right now. So we've got a lot of issues with that.

So when you're making a choice to buy a sustainable species that is abundant, which is a word we should always use, you should look at the smaller fish like herring and sardines. These are the smaller. Bait school fish that are really abundant, that are actually delicious depending on how you prepare 'em.

And shellfish for sure. You've got anything that's a filter feeder that will help clean that water is very oysters. Yep. Oysters, mussels, clams. These are the things we should be eating all the time. Those are the species that are actually doing great things for our ocean. So more consumption means we want to continue to plant and grow them as well, because you could farm.

Most of these [00:06:00] shellfish and then just your uncommon species. People are not eating enough. Spanish mackerel, as I just mentioned, people are not eating porgies, which is a fish that is absolutely delicious. There's like three or four different types of species and they, they become these byc catches that people.

Are starting to pay attention to, but we always go back and forth. You know, all of a sudden there's a great bycatch movement. It's like, let's get some gray porgie. Fantastic. And then next week they're at a restaurant like, Hey, they got grouper, we should get the grouper. They're like, no, you shouldn't get the grouper you should get So.

Yeah.

Dalia Colon: Why do you think that is? Why do you think people aren't going for the porgy and the sardines? Where do you even buy those things?

Steve Phelps: They're there. I think it's getting out there. It's getting information. There's fish markets everywhere and, and you have to get out as a consumer, especially if you're seafood eater.

It's one thing to go to Publix, which is actually doing a great job, to tell you the truth. They're starting to pay attention to aquaculture in Florida, which we could get into later. But you need to go to these markets and, and ask about [00:07:00] fish. You know, you'll see things that are lined up on there, whether it's barrel fish and these porgies and all these different species that are just, they're not common 'cause chefs aren't putting 'em on menus, and they're not near restaurants, but they're there.

And a lot of these fish, the fishermen, the captains tend to keep 'em too. Oh.

And it's always, there's a lot of fish that are like the Captain's Secret, you know, but they,

Dalia Colon: captain secret, that's a good name for like a brand of, I don't know. Uh, spices. We'll,

workshop, yes. Spices, uh, marinades

Steve Phelps: clam clam seasoning for a clam bake.

Get the captain's secret?

Dalia Colon: Yes. Oh my gosh.

Steve Phelps: We'll get like a good Irish accent in it.

Dalia Colon: Yeah. Yeah. We'll, we'll have you work on that. Okay. So the captain knows that these fish are worth. Preparing and eating. And are there other cultures? I mean, I think of like sort of quote unquote mainstream America. They want their grouper, you know, they come to Florida, we're both from Cleveland.

You know, when my relatives come, they want that grouper because they do, that's like the classic Florida fish. But [00:08:00] are there. Cultures within Florida that are in on this secret and, and what can we learn from them?

Steve Phelps: I think all your fishing areas, uh, you know, there's Cortes, which is not too far from here.

You go up to AP Bell's market, you'll see a lot of different species there. But it's, it's instant to me that right away there's this grouper for $25 a pound, and then there's this other squirrel fish or whatever for like eight. You're like, what's the difference? Does that taste terrible? Like, no, it's just a little smaller and people don't need it, so we're trying to get rid of it.

So it's, it's education. People like us have to be these ambassadors for what we're doing in the industry. It's like this tide and flow thing, unfortunately with, with the, the food, the culinary industry where all of a sudden there's a great wave of, everybody's talking about bycatch or trash fish they called it at one point, which wasn't really helping sales for anybody.

No. Um, and. We just need to make sure that people know that grouper isn't the only thing, plus it's [00:09:00] gonna be gone soon. I mean, this is what we do on our planet. We hunt and fish things to extinction. So if your parents came down from Cleveland and they're like, grouper sandwich, grouper sandwich, and I gave them a cobia sandwich, they'd be like, okay, I probably, is this better than the grouper sandwich?

Tell 'em it's grouper. Not, no, no, no, no, no, no. We never do that. No, we don't do that here. We can't start messing. That is a problem though. Yes, it is. Um. But Kobe is an amazing fish and we actually offer it. We, we have it raw here. We have it as a cooked menu item for dinner sometimes, or a medium rare item, and then you could get it cooked as a fish sandwich.

So I think it's actually better than grouper. I think a lot of these fish are better than grouper. So you know, it's just the fact that we have to have the opportunity to have your parents try it, and that's. I mean, it's, the old proof is in the pudding. It's, it's good.

Dalia Colon: Yeah.

Steve Phelps: And I've had people come in here that just like, that's why we come here because we have opportunities to try different species.

Mm. Last night we had, uh, [00:10:00] triple tail and red fish on the menu, and people were like, red fish, I didn't know you could get red fish. And I was like, well, it's not commercially caught anymore, but it's being farmed at a premium level. And I sold like. This is a restaurant that did over a hundred people last night.

We sold 46 orders of that. So that's a huge percentage. Wow. And then triple tail species that some people never heard of. It's, it's getting like this, what I'd call chef trust and confidence that they could say, well, if you go to Indigenous. You know, try the Kobe Yes. And they're like, what's that? And then try the triple tail.

And it, and it's, it's that confidence and that chef trust that we gotta keep educating and teaching people. But it, it takes a village to really teach people that,

Dalia Colon: how do you do that? Because you're right. If I'm paying good money, I mean, this is a beautiful restaurant. You are at the top of your game. And so if I'm gonna invest in a meal at Indigenous, I want to know that it's gonna be.

One of the best meals of my life. So how do you educate the [00:11:00] customer and how do other restaurants educate the customer to, to open up their minds to some of these things?

Steve Phelps: I think helping give them the tools. You know, you and I were talking about these little seafood watch guides and stuff. If you're a concern diner, which I, I see a lot more, you know, my restaurant is like this very weird, it's like a mood ring at night.

So when we open at five 30, our clientele is a little bit different. Because a lot of those people may be going to, at this time of year, they're going to a seven 30 orchestra or theater show. And, and then after that we tend to get a younger clientele that is really, really more concerned and in depth about what they're eating that night.

And so we've noticed that lots of questions come up and having your team know how to answer those. I'm basically teaching my service staff how to be as educated as my chefs are.

Dalia Colon: Okay, so

Steve Phelps: we could teach that.

Dalia Colon: [00:12:00] Yeah. You mentioned these cards. This is Seafood Watch and it's like a tiny little pamphlet, and you said you put this, it's a pocket guide.

It's a pocket guide, if you will, they call it. And you put this. In with the check.

Steve Phelps: So yeah, so the Monterey Bay Aquarium has a program called Seafood Watch that I've been on their chef's, uh, blue Ribbon Task Force for many years. And what we do is we work hand in hand with the, uh, Monterey Bay Aquariums scientists and their teams that do all the research globally.

Which evaluate the stocks of fish. They also find out different farming methods to prove of their methods and how things are working, and it's a traffic light system, so these little pocket guides are regional. The one we have here obviously is from the southeast, and it gives you the traffic light thing that says.

You know, red has a, if it has a red next to it, you should avoid it. Yellow means it's okay. It's good, it's still not green. And then green is obviously the best choice. And so each one of these pocket guides, which are regional. [00:13:00] Are done from all the research and our guests are, they're taking 'em out of the checkbook, which is interesting because that's, that's a tool we put in there to say, Hey, here's your check.

You know, we did educate you a little bit before dinner. I. But if you really want to continue your education on seafood, take that little pocket guide with you. And it's great because out of all the chefs around the country that are in this Seafood Watch program, they keep thinking that we throw 'em out.

'cause I have to order another case and I'll speak to the gentleman in, in Monterey and he goes, I just sent you a thousand. I said, I know, but I need more. And he goes. Are they throwing 'em out? I said, actually, no. They're engaging with our staff and they're using 'em.

Dalia Colon: What a good problem to have. That's cool.[00:14:00]

You said that people ask a lot of questions, so I wanna know what are some of the most common questions that you get? Earlier you also said that when we go to the fish market, we should be asking questions. If we were gonna name a few that we should just have ready to go. What? Question, should we be asking

Steve Phelps: the first question?

I think this goes for a seafood market or a restaurant. You should ask where that species came from. Do you know where this fish came from? Let's say I'm walking into Publix, I see that striped bass, and I ask the person at the counter. Typically the signs will say where, but not always say, Hey, where did that stripe bass come from?

If you get an educated answer to that, that's gonna be fantastic. Also if you have your little pocket guide with you, right? You whip this out. You pull that out, see if it's got a QR code on it. Sorry sir. But this pocket guide says you're wrong. Oh my gosh. Um, you [00:15:00] need to ask that. And I think that at a restaurant or at a a market, if you can't get an answer.

You should rethink your choice that day. I mean, my wife will grab my arm and squeeze it so hard. If we're at a restaurant and they say, tonight's special is cherry plank baked salmon with blah, blah, blah. And then I, I'm about to say the where'd that salmon come from? And she'll lock in. Oh, and she'll go, don't do it, doctor.

Don't ruin this for me because. Typically if somebody doesn't know that answer, especially with salmon, which is a very political fish, and it's

Dalia Colon: where do we want our salmon to come? I say our salmon. I'm a vegetarian. Where do people want their salmon to come from?

Steve Phelps: Right now? Yeah, currently. 'cause this really fluctuates.

Is New Zealand.

Dalia Colon: Oh. New Zealand product is really, really, I thought you were, were just

gonna say like Gulfport, Florida. Like local, local. Local. I don't,

Steve Phelps: yeah. Salmon is a very touch and go because it's one of the highest. Farmed [00:16:00] products in the world as far as seafood goes, I believe shrimp's number one and salmon's number two when we talk about aquaculture and, and consumption.

But salmon is always having these salmon farms in Chile, and there's some, uh, Scotland and all. There's, there's problems that happen, whether it's escaped

species or some type of, um, there were sea lights in Chile, which really wiped out the industry a few years ago, which just gave Chile a bad name. And so these newer companies that have been, you know, changing the way they farm, especially in New Zealand, has been top notch.

I mean, they're spending all their money to make sure that these fish are safe. They will not get out of these pens. They're not getting any antibiotics, they're not being infiltrated by anything else. So that technology has changed, but it goes back to just asking that question as you said. When you go to buy something, ask where it's from and if you have the opportunity, if [00:17:00] they say, you know, if it's a farmed fish, you can still ask that same question.

Do you know how it was farmed? And if it was a wild caught fish, you could ask if they know how it was caught, because that's another part of our conversation. I rarely run tuna here, and when I do, I try to get yellow fin tuna. That was pole caught like. Old school, like somebody like had a line and cast it in it like Curtis Hemingway and caught it because of that method is just so much safer from, you know, dolphin turtle nets all, I mean, that's that whole story we could get into.

But that's why when I had tuna on the menu just recently, people were like, oh my God, this is incredible. Where'd you get it? And we told 'em the story and then I said. Enjoy it because I probably won't get it again for a while because I'll only get it when I know where it came from and how it was called.

Dalia Colon: Wow. And I love that because so much of food is about storytelling. It's so when someone can talk to you and you can give the backstory of how you got the fish and why it's on the menu this week. [00:18:00] I mean, that's everything that stays with you long after the meal is gone. Is one better than the other, farmed versus wild caught?

Steve Phelps: It's not. You know, I go through this a lot because I do a lot of advocate work for aquaculture and different farms around the world. And they're both, you know, they have to work in harmony. I mean, we have to remember, there's like in the ocean, it's like a pie. You're, you could take a few slices out, just don't eat the whole pie.

So we have to really keep, keep a few slices in that pie. Um, which is regulations. The US is the top for our protection program for seafood because of the Magnuson Stevenson Act, which really protects all this overfishing and all this illegal fishing, but. Aquaculture does what? Wild caught. Still trying to hold onto.

So picture this. Say there's a guy who is catching yellow tail snapper. Well, their regulations change. You're only allowed to catch so much by weight each year, or you're only allowed to fish for a certain time in a [00:19:00] certain month. And the reason they do that is because we don't want that species to be depleted.

Now, on the other side of that, you have to remember that. It. This planet will deplete that species. So what Aquaculture's doing is actually holding onto that and farm raising species that we will continue to have an option to have a protein like that to grow. So it's that symbiotic relationship that they really have to start working together.

And you're starting to see it. You're seeing like kelp farms in Maine starting to work with Maine fishermen and lobster fishermen.

Dalia Colon: Mm.

Steve Phelps: So that's how it's starting to coincide with each other.

Dalia Colon: Okay. Why do you think Florida could potentially be a leader in the aquaculture movement?

Steve Phelps: I think, I think right now, Mississippi's number one in aquaculture.

What? And that it's 'cause of the Catfish farms, there's so many of them. It's Mississippi, Louisiana. And [00:20:00] then Florida. I think that's who's the best, believe it or not, I might, I think Washington's in there usually on the bottom state of Washington's in there too. But Florida just has the, the temperature that you can keep farming different species year round.

I mean, that's what that really comes down to. So as you see that, most of those are in the south. It is 'cause of wa, the temperature, anything that's gonna have a hard winter freeze, it's gonna be tough. Like I just came back from Idaho and it was a great steelhead trout farm called Ance and we were outside and I was freezing my butt off.

But the water temperature that they use for the farm raising those fish comes from the aquifers in Idaho underneath. Ground that filters through all this lava rock and the water temperature is always 58 degrees. So there's little benefits of pockets that can grow fish in those farms. But ideally, you're seeing Florida being such a leader in it because the temperature,

Dalia Colon: okay.

What do you think the [00:21:00] future of seafood sustainability will look like? Will we all be eating sardines? And by the way, what are you doing with these sardines? 'cause I know somebody's like, I'm not buying those.

Steve Phelps: Yeah, I don't touch too much sardines. I, I truly don't. I, I mean, I like to fish too, so when we use it at as bait, I always laugh.

I was like, if we don't catch anything today, it looks like a sardine dinner for all of us, you know? Same thing with with different small species that we fish with, but I think the future really will be these unknown species that we haven't really tapped into. We'll find ways to produce them. I see us moving into eating more of those species, but this is where.

The future of seafood is, it's gonna be, it's farming, it's learning how to grow. We have so many different systems. We have raceway, uh, water systems, the RES circulation systems. Then you've got near shore and offshore farming. So there's so much of it. And I think what's really great to [00:22:00] remember to our consumers and our listeners is that it happens here quite a bit where we have anti fish farm people.

But we have to say to them, and we do, we say, I'm sorry, sir. What did you have for breakfast today? He's like, well, I had bacon and eggs. Mm. I was like, you do understand that that bacon came from a farm? Those eggs came from a farm. You are just not used to hearing the word fish farm. But we've been farming all of our proteins for years and years and hundreds of years.

And to be honest, it's been a thousand years 'cause they've found tilapia grown in, in these Middle Eastern places that goodness knows how long they've been doing it. So I, I think that that is like the new way to really get to the people who are not understanding aquaculture. It's just a method of farming, you know?

Alright.

Dalia Colon: Okay. The farmer. Okay. I ask you all the seafood questions. Now we need to talk about Cleveland. You're wearing a Cleveland hat. You're from Shaker Heights.

Steve Phelps: Shaker Heights. [00:23:00] Shaker Heights. Born and raised. I went

Dalia Colon: to Orange High School's. So crazy. So we're like literal neighbors. That's crazy. That's wild.

I bet we went to some of the same places and know some of the same people. Okay. So how, if at all, does your Ohio upbringing show up on the menu here?

Steve Phelps: Wow, that's an interesting question. Especially from someone from Cleveland. I'm just am Cleveland still. I just can't get it outta my soul. I still dig out like Ohio recipes all the time.

I started doing a version of skyline chilies.

Dalia Colon: Oh my gosh. Like the

Steve Phelps: Cincinnati style chili on the menu, and

Dalia Colon: it's like chili spaghetti.

Steve Phelps: The Buckeyes from Ohio State were a one-time deal. We thought we were just gonna try. I'm like, let's, I just really wanted to make him, and I had this really amazing chef in the kitchen named Paige, and she's like, oh, that sounds great, chef.

Yes, let's make some more tributes. To Ohio, you know, and we would do versions of like Poor Boys, which was from Hot Sauce Williams, which was a yes place I used to go to. And so those things just started getting into my cuisine. We made the Buckeyes and I was like, eh, we'll see what happens. People went [00:24:00] nuts over, oh my gosh.

Dalia Colon: I love the, they're like a peanut butter chocolate little. It's a peanut butter ball. It a fudge butter ball dipped

Steve Phelps: in chocolate. They're so good. And then we amplified it, made this raspberry jam with it. You're making me homesick and I remember. The fish fries. These are really just classic memories while I'm sitting here with you right now, this is a lead into something coming up.

I've been wanting to do a, a proper fish fry in this town. Nobody does it. The water's right there. Um, we're known for when what we do with fish, and we really want to start having a night this year, probably when things slow down to do like a Friday night fish fry and make it a thing because that.

Cleveland culture Yes. That you asked me about is still just buried in my soul. And it's like starting to come out in the top and it's just going, you know, let's, let's be heard and let's be proud of it and let's keep doing it because it just falls into what. We're up to here in Indigenous. You know, I

Dalia Colon: love that so much because yes, it's the [00:25:00] food and the Buckeyes and all of that stuff, but it's also the spirit, I think, and the hospitality like Midwesterners are just, we're just so nice.

You know what I mean? And, and I've experienced it here with you today and, and the way you say you, you know, go around and talk to the guests and take time to educate them. So please never lose that. I love that so much. Oh my gosh, Steve, this was fantastic. I could talk five more hours about Cleveland. I know no one.

Wants to hear that. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Steve Phelps: The educational part that we spoke on for a minute was just ask questions about where your food's coming from. It doesn't have to be our fish. It could be the apple on your table. If you research some of the apples at a grocery store, you'll be like, mortified that that apple was probably picked from a tree two years ago.

Things like that. So, you know, I think food awareness is great. And then the other thing we as, as a very responsible chef is we want you to trust us as best you can. 'cause we're not, I'm not in a kitchen to fool you. I'm in a kitchen to nourish you, [00:26:00] and I'm in a kitchen to educate you and actually create my paintings every day, so to speak.

And I think that that's, that's, that's pretty important to everybody right now. We need to have that outlet and that trust and a place to go to take you away from the daily crap.

Dalia Colon: Yep. And this is it. Oh my gosh. What a cozy. Space. I might just stay here for the rest of the day. Steve, thank you so much. This is fantastic.

Steve Phelps is co-owner and head chef of Indigenous restaurant in Sarasota, and he's a native Clevelander like moi. He shared his recipe for lemon pickled shrimp, and you'll find it on our website, the Zest podcast.com podcast. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron.