

The Zest S12E2

Ellen: [00:00:00] So I want you to be able to create these big, sexy, tropical flavors wherever you live.

Dalia: Mm ooh. Your next cookbook needs to be called Big, Sexy, Tropical Flavors. 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.

Plant-based cuisine with a tropical twist.

When Ellen Kanner went vegan in the 1980s, she couldn't imagine buying oat milk or plant-based cheese in a grocery store Today, she says, being vegan is easier than ever, thanks to restaurants and mainstream supermarkets accommodating the plant-based lifestyle and the food writer is herself. Helping folks lean into eating vegan with her cookbook.

It's called *Miami Vegan: Plant-Based Recipes From the Tropics to Your Table*. The book veganizes South Florida, favorites like picadillo, ceviche, and even Key Lime [00:01:00] Pie, my personal favorite. Ellen chatted with me about her must have pantry staples navigating social situations. As a vegan that can be tricky, and the recipe she cooks to win over meat eaters.

Ellen: My name is Ellen Kanner. I'm a fifth generation Miami native, a long time vegan, so I thought I would put both together and I have a new cookbook, *Miami Vegan: Plant-Based Recipes from the Tropics to Your Table*.. We have such a delicious mix of cultures and cuisines here, so it's not one thing, it's a whole lot of stuff.

I mean, I call my book Miami Vegan, but there's Latin influences, there's Caribbean influences. There's still a little bit of Old South in Miami, and not just like one Latin or one Caribbean, but Bahamian, Jamaican, you know, all of this stuff, and everyone brings their own food ways. To Miami [00:02:00] and it all winds up on the plate and it's really, really good.

Dalia: Mm-hmm. That's such a great distinction because I think a lot of people would say even Florida food is a category, but then within that there are so many subcategories and regional dishes. So let's dive into the cookbook. What are some of the iconic Miami dishes that you veganized in the book?

Ellen: You probably have something quite similar in Tampa.

You know, you wanna hang out. By the beach and it's hot and you want a beer and it's nice and cold. A lot of people order smoked fish dip. Well, it's mayonnaise and fish and being vegan. Neither one are gonna work for me, but I have actually created that using Nori Flakes for the fishy brininess. Artichoke hearts and Tempe and I do use a little vegan mayo.

And I gotta tell you, it is so close to the real thing that all my guy friends and my husband love it, but I [00:03:00] can't even eat it 'cause they think, I know I made this, but it tastes like fish to me.

Dalia: I have that problem with some jackfruit dishes that are like substituting pulled pork, and I'm like, this tastes like pork.

I, I don't think I can do this. That is too funny and very clever. What are some other ones?

Ellen: Well, rice and beans are my love language. I think they are love language for a lot of people here. I have several, but I think my favorite in the cookbook is a recipe I'd been making for years long before I thought of Miami Vegan.

I call it Caribbean pigeon peas and rice. It's super basic. It's staple foods, it's pantry foods, rice and beans that get. Fancied up with a sofrito, onions, garlic, chili pepper, and it looks like a whole bunch of confetti in the pot and it tastes like it too.

Dalia: Amazing. I think we definitely eat with our eyes first.

A lot of chefs we've had on the pod have said that, and so colorful sofrito, and [00:04:00] then you add in obviously the wonderful aromas. It almost doesn't even matter what you put it on because a lot of the proteins you're talking about, like tempeh and beans. They're kind of bland on their own. Just like a chicken breast would be bland on its own.

And it's really more about how you flavor it, how you season it. So I love that. Okay, gimme one more. What's another dish that people have to have in Miami and you veganized it?

Ellen: Key lime pie. Mm. This was the last recipe I was able to execute with confidence because everyone loves key lime pie. And there are dairy versions

and there are vegan versions, and my father taught me as a kid, this is what key lime pie is and this is what it isn't.

So it took me a long time before I actually felt okay. I have nailed it, dad.

Dalia: Okay. Tell me about the key lime pie. What's the secret? 'cause I'm thinking people use what sweetened condensed milk and eggs. And obviously you're not using either of those.

Ellen: There is [00:05:00] such a thing as sweetened condensed coconut milk.

Ooh. And it's, you can get it. I can get it in my grocery store. You probably can too. Otherwise, an aquafaba, which is, as we know the, the liquid in a can of chickpeas and it is magical.

Dalia: It, I was just thinking of the word magical. It really is. It's a perfect egg substitute.

Ellen: It helps to have a, like a good, strong arm or a standing mixer and just get that nice and billowy, and then it's pretty much like standard key lime pie, graham cracker crust.

Just makes sure there's no honey in the graham crackers, the sweetened condensed milk, whole lot of lime juice, not a lot of sugar because the sweetened condensed milk is already sweet and it's so good. I really should have eaten breakfast before I talked to you. I might have to

Dalia: have pie for breakfast now.

Okay. You mentioned it's fruit, right? It's it's fruit, it's it's limes, it's uh, citrus, vitamin C you mentioned beans and rice, which is one of my favorite dishes. Anytime I go to a Latin [00:06:00] restaurant, just gimme like a plate of beans and rice with some, uh, sweetened plantains, and I'm a happy girl. Mm-hmm. It's also.

A cheap meal to make. It's one of the cheapest meals you could have. So I think of Miami as a really expensive place to live or visit. Maybe an expensive place to go out to eat. And a lot of people might assume that being vegan is expensive because you have to go to Whole Foods or you know, they call it whole paycheck and get all these special ingredients, but tell us why that's not true.

Ellen: Uh, beans and rice are a very good reason. I sort of think of them as the people's food, whatever people were talking about here. Almost every culture has beans and rice. Hey, this is gonna get me through the wheat dish. And they're all unique and they're all wonderful, and they are all affordable. Both of these things are super shelf stable.

They're probably gonna be the cheapest thing in your grocery cart. And believe me, during COVID, I [00:07:00] so stocked up on these things I thought I did anyway. I have a Korean friend. And I, she said, have you got enough food? I said, of course I have enough food. You know? She said, no, I need you to get a Korean amount of rice.

Dalia: Yeah. The big rice. The big rice. That's too funny. Yeah. Okay. You've, you've mentioned beans and rice, which are shelf stable and that's fantastic. What are some of your other kitchen staples that we could just have on hand?

Ellen: I think a well-stocked spice cabinet is gonna get you through just about anything.

And I confess, I have a, we spice addiction. I have a very, very full Spice Pantry, and my husband says, it's like alchemy. You know, you, you pull this jar out. You, you know, you have this bag of something. You, you put it into dinner and it's magic. I. Have a, a pantry list In Miami Vegan, one of the, two of the, the spices that are used a lot, [00:08:00] both in Caribbean and Latin cuisine are all spice, which despite its name, is not a spice or even a spice blend.

It's a berry and it's got a mildly sweet. Earthy taste. It's also used a lot in Middle Eastern food and, and so, you know, sometimes when you taste that flavor's like, oh yeah, I know that. Also cumin, which is also, it's got a low note, it's a little funky. It's so, so good. Love cumin. A lot of times I'll use both in a recipe.

They really build flavor so easy.

Dalia: Mm-hmm. And I can't make any sort of like Tex-Mex dish or anything like that with even my beans without cumin. Okay. Let's talk about nutritional yeast, because that's scary for a lot of people. It looks almost like fish food flakes. It's like these yellow mm-hmm. Flakes.

But I think those are also magical. So tell us about nutritional yeast.

Ellen: Okay. I have been a vegan for a very long time. Um, before there was such a thing as commercial vegan cheese, you would even want to eat.

[00:09:00] Before that, there was nutritional yeast, and I agree with you Adalia. When someone told me about it, I thought, how is this cheese?

It looks like, you know, the weird craft yellow stuff. It's flaky and wow, is it umami? It's very, very cheesy tasting and a lot of the brands of it are B12 fortified. B12 is the one nutrient that most vegans don't get, and also a lot of meat eaters too because they have digestive issues. B12 is something your body has to work with, so.

You can get some delicious cheesy flavor. You can do some good B12 for yourself. It's wonderful.

Dalia: It's so good. I actually prefer making my own cheese sauce to those store-bought vegan cheeses. It's a little bit of work, you know, you gotta like blend with some cashews and maybe lemon juice and things like that, but boy is it good.

Okay, [00:10:00] so that's a good swap for cheese. What are some other swaps for the foods that people might miss if they were to go plant-based?

Ellen: First of all, you know that plant-based milk has gotten so much more better. I remember being of the. Brown soy milk in a box era, and it was so sad. It didn't taste like milk.

It didn't mix with my coffee. It just sat there. Oat milk is a game changer. It adds that incredible creaminess a lot. I turn my cousin on who is a dairy person to it, and she loves it. It's great. You are right that tofu and Tempe are blank canvases. You can do anything with them. The key lime pie uses silk and tofu, so you get that kind of creaminess and protein.

Most of my recipe. Yeah. And protein. And um, for a lot of the other dishes I use it, I like a really firm tofu, so it bounces. So [00:11:00] you do get that chew. I think a lot of times when we think. Of the foods we like, it is as much mouthfeel as it is flavor. So you can nail a flavor. I, I, I had a recipe that didn't make it, that had the flavor, but it was like, it needs some oomph, it needs some structure.

And if I couldn't nail it, it was not in the book.

Dalia: What was the recipe?

Ellen: Uh, one of Miami's iconic dishes, and in fact, I believe it started on the West Coast Cuban sandwich.

Dalia: Mm. That's a tough one. I get you. I had a jackfruit, rupa vieja that did not see the light of day either. I, I maybe would give it another try now.

Yeah. And for people, if you're listening and thinking, I'm afraid of tofu, tofu is bland. There are so many ways to get the texture and the flavor that you want, and honestly, Google it. We don't necessarily have time for a deep dive now, but there are ways to, to get it crispy and crunchy like they do in the restaurants.

Okay. Speaking of restaurants. How do you order in a restaurant? A [00:12:00] lot of times maybe there's nothing vegan on the menu. Are you just sitting there with the bread basket?

Ellen: I've gone through that too, but Miami has gotten much, much better. I think a lot of mainstream restaurants will have at least one vegan option.

I went out for dinner with my husband last night. He is an omnivore, but we've been there enough times. Usually I'll, I'll call ahead and say, Hey, I'm a vegan. What can you do for me? But the chef is a sweetheart, and last night he made the most incredible pasta with, it was lemon and artichoke and tomatoes, and it was so bright and summery and totally vegan.

It's wonderful.[00:13:00]

Dalia: Okay. I love that you are centering the veggies in all of these recipes. You're not hiding them. We're not sneaking them in. Pureing, I've done this, you know, puree the peppers and carrots into the spaghetti sauce so people don't see it. I know that's one of your pet peeves. Say more about that.

Ellen: Well, I think when you're sneaking, you're hiding.

There's nothing to be ashamed of here. I say this is enhancing. This is improving. Give vegetables their due show that they can be the heroes they are.

Dalia: Ooh, they are the heroes. Yeah. It doesn't have to be the meat and three where meat is the star of the plate. There's so many other fun things you can do.

All right. I wanna get into more of your story because you've alluded to the fact that you've been a [00:14:00] vegan since. Before you could find, you know, oat

milk in your big box store and, and when there really weren't a lot of great vegan options in restaurants. So when and why did you go vegan?

Ellen: I went vegetarian.

I went meatless when I was 12 because I love cows and I wanted to annoy my parents a little. And when you're a tween, this is a really effective way to do it, plus. You just get to discover so much about our food system. Even when I was 12, and this is before the internet, I was like, oh my goodness, there is so much more out there and I'm gonna have to find out what it is.

So it did sort of bring me into the kitchen and like you, well you are such a multimedia star. Oh, you're sweet. But I was a food writer and the more I wrote about our food system. The more I was really sure that being vegan was [00:15:00] the way to go. And you know there are PETA videos that will scare you pants less.

I would much rather coax people into approaching plant-based food by making it delicious and accessible.

Dalia: Sure. I'm on the same page. So what's a vegan dish that you'll make for company to maybe win them over?

Ellen: There's, um, a Spanish dish called Fabada Asturiana. It's very fancy, uh, pork and beans. Here I do the chickpeas with saffron, so it's headi and smoky and tomatoey and umami, and I'll have a bunch of Spanish tapas with it.

Pimentos per drone, the blistered shishitos, pan con tomate the tomato bread, and Sheri mushrooms and. It's delicious, it's filling, and you know, all these big flavors create. There's a Spanish word for it called sopita mesa. And it means not just [00:16:00] that this was a great dinner, but this is a time you wanna spend with people.

You wanna linger at the table, you wanna laugh, you wanna, you wanna share. And that's what I hope a lot of the dishes in this book are.

Dalia: Yeah, that just sounds like a party. And saffron can be pricey, but if you're not buying a steak or you know a huge thing of chicken, then you can splurge a little bit on some of those other things that will add flavor.

Is there anything challenging about being vegan in Miami?

Ellen: We have lost a couple big vegan, well, some of my favorite vegan restaurants closed after the pandemic, but there is a trend that. More mainstream restaurants have like finally gotten the message and are adding more vegan options. So it, it's a change in the whole industry right now.

Dalia: What do you love about being vegan? This season on the podcast, we're really leaning into joy and things that, you know, we have a zest for. [00:17:00] It's maybe a little bit more legwork to be a vegan. Like you said, you called the restaurant ahead of time, you're making your own cheese sauces, so why are you passionate about being vegan?

Why does it bring you joy?

Ellen: Oh, but it absolutely does. This is a very good question, Dalia, and I don't know that I've actually pared it that way.

Dalia: I don't know that I have either. I'm a vegetarian, so this is a good challenge for us both.

Ellen: You know, there are so many reasons to go vegan. I think just generally it helps me live lighter on the planet.

You know, we're facing sea level rise. We're in hurricane season now, so anything I can do to keep the, the, the temperature down and, and the waters at bay, it makes me feel better. It makes me feel like I'm active. I'm taking apart. We talk about being consumers. This helps me be a participant. This helps me be an actor in our climate [00:18:00] and in protecting animals and in my health, which I know is a big reason people go vegan.

I don't really think about it anymore. Because I have been, well for so long, I used to have like a, a perpetual runny nose as a kid. I didn't even make the distinction for a long time until I was dairy free for many years, and I thought, oh, I wonder if there's a connection. There is. Uh, so it just helps me live my life better.

Wow. It does sort of add joy that way.

Dalia: Mm. That's beautiful. So how long have you been dairy free? I think it's easy for people to say, I'm gonna stop eating meat. I did this and then I'm just gonna eat grilled cheese every day. But that can come with its own issues. So when did you just completely give up animal products?

30 years ago. Wow. That's incredible. That's amazing. Okay. There's somebody listening who. Loves meat. Or maybe, you know, some of the cultures [00:19:00] you talked about in the beginning of our conversation are so dependent on meat. Meat heavy. Yes. Yeah. You go to a family gathering and they're serving, you know, uh.

Chicken and arroz con pollo. Yeah. And it and you. You don't wanna be the outcast. Give some encouragement to that person. What's a first step they could take? Maybe not even to go completely vegan, but if they're just looking to lean into plant-based eating.

Ellen: I have a vegan arroz con pollo recipe in my book. And like you, I had wanted to use jackfruit.

Jackfruit is. Itself. Kind of scary looking, but man, it is. The green jackfruit is so meaty and fantastic, but I wanted to make it accessible for everyone, and a lot of the process stuff was already seasoned and I didn't like the texture of it. So I say you can do it with jackfruit. If you can get your hands on it, you can do it with Tempe, you can do it with tofu, [00:20:00] and it absolutely has the color, the flavor, the meatiness.

But without the chicken. Mm. So when you do go over to someone's house and yes, you wanna be a great guest, maybe bring a whole lot of something else that everyone can share and. Also be mindful of the fact that if you are not eating what they've prepared, it feels a little bit like you're rejecting them and you're not.

So be gentle. Be gentle with yourself, be gentle with them, and have wonderful food.

Dalia: Hmm, that's great advice for life. Oh, fantastic. And just a word about the jackfruit. It is scary. It's like as big as a watermelon. It's spiky. It can be intimidating, but I've found it already cut up at some of the, um, Asian grocery stores.

That's another fun thing about being plant-based is trying. Things that you wouldn't normally try exploring, stores that you wouldn't [00:21:00] normally explore. So that's a great place to find it. That's a little more user friendly. I've also bought it at Publix and asked them to cut it up for me. 'cause you know, at Publix, shopping is a pleasure.

They're happy to do it for you. So that's another little hack there. You have given so many great tips. I love the positivity. We're not beating people over the head. Everybody gets to make their own choices. But if this is something that you're looking to do. Ellen's book has some fantastic recipes and pantry staples.

Ellen, is there anything else you wanna add?

Ellen: Well, you have a pretty wonderful book too. Florida Vegetarian Cookbook. Oh, thank you for that shout. It was so excited. I was like, no, I gotta tell you, it was like this girl is my kitchen sister. You really? We

Dalia: really are kitchen sisters. And it's funny because some of the recipes, if I were to write them again today, years after having written the book, I figured out ways that I could have completely taken out all the animal products.

So it's fun to evolve. Everybody's on their own. Journey.

Ellen: [00:22:00] Right. So, okay. What would you change Now

Dalia: there are a few recipes that have cheese that I would. Lean into seasoning with other things, either like the cashew cheese with nutritional yeast, but I know on a Tuesday night, you know, people don't always have time to do that, but there are other ways.

Mm-hmm. You can add flavor with like peppers and garlic and of course spices like you talked about. So that would probably be the main thing. I, I, I just like to make it. Accessible for people. I think when you see a recipe with 30 ingredients, it's very intimidating. Or when you are putting honey in your tea.

I had honey in my tea yesterday and people are like beating you over the head for it. That's just not appealing, you know? No. So I love your approach.

Ellen: I really try and make the recipes accessible, and because they're made with Whole Foods, [00:23:00] maybe you can't get your hands on a fresh mango and it's mango season here and wow, they have been so good.

Use a frozen one. It's fine. Use papaya instead or orange. There are ways around it. So I want you to be able to create these big, sexy, tropical flavors wherever you live. Mm

Dalia: ooh. Your next cookbook needs to be called Big, sexy, tropical Flavors. I love that. Ellen. This was such a blast. Florida is a great place to go.

Plant-based. We have so much fantastic. Sexy produce. So thank you so much for talking with us.

Ellen: What a pleasure. Wishing you all delicious things. Let's play in the kitchen together sometime.

Dalia: Ellen Kanner is the author of Miami Vegan: Plant-Based Recipes from the tropics to your table, she shared her recipe for Caribbean pigeon pea and rice. Doesn't that just sound like a party? You can find it on our website, the zest podcast.com. I'm Dalia [00:24:00] Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron

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