



Vivian Howard

I think being a people pleaser is in my DNA. So, it'll never go away. But I've realized that I'm also one of those people that I need to try and please,

-Music Intro-

Laurie March

I'm Laurie March, and this is Heart to Table, a new podcast where we approach food and cooking from a different angle.

Laurie March

Today, I'm thrilled to introduce you to Vivian Howard, restaurant tour, chef, two time cookbook author, farmer's daughter and prolific TV host. I feel like I need another cup of coffee just to keep up with that list. Vivian, thanks so much for joining us.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, thank you for having me.

Laurie March

Today we're going to talk about providing some fresh start to the kitchen and fresh start to the year ideas. And I feel like we've come to the right place with you.

Vivian Howard

I hope so. We're all looking for a fresh start this year.

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Laurie March

I agree. I don't know about you, but I think this time of year, I always find myself trying to shed what wasn't working, and try to form some new habits or really focus on what I actually care about, what does January mean to you?

Vivian Howard

Well, I try not to place so much emphasis on New Year's resolutions, because I've never been successful. But even if you try to not base the new year on new behaviors, I still always, I'm looking for the next year to be better than the last. And that often relates to, the time I'm able to spend with my kids, the foods that my kids want to eat, and that I work to feed them. And also, new habits for myself. And so January, even though I don't want it to mean a lot, it always ends up meaning a lot.

Laurie March

Yes, I love that. I feel like I've never kept a New Year's resolution. I mean, this January, it feels like a black eye or two. So I'm truly hoping that, some tiny little habit changes, or tiny little ideas could spark something fabulous.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, I mean, I think we just don't need to be too ... We need to pick things that will work and that we can actually do, rather than saying, "I'm going to cook dinner for my family five nights a week, and we're going to sit down and stare at each other while we're eating." I think we could make a promise to ourselves that's actually possible.

Laurie March

I love that, a promise to ourselves. Vivian, I recently spent some time with your newest cookbook, which I have to say, I enjoyed it literally cover to cover. It's called, This Will Make It Taste Good. This is your second cookbook, which I have to give you a high five here. I feel like one cookbook sounds like such a monumental effort, but this is a second one. You went back a second time and duped it out and knocked out a whole second book. How does that feel?

Vivian Howard

It feels good. I actually got into cooking as a means to translate that experience working in a restaurant into a career as a food writer, and I went down a very long meandering path to make that happen. So after my first book, which was more than like, 600 pages long, I was dying to write another one. And this book is really about the way that I cook at home.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Vivian Howard

I think it's perfect for what you're talking about, making small changes in the way we approach our kitchens that have a big impact.

Laurie March

I personally feel like cookbooks can be super intimidating. And I feel like they're always about the perfect recipe and then you've made the perfect thing. And for me I feel like I'm failing a lot, like I burned something or didn't have what I needed. So I had to sub something in and it didn't quite work, and that perfection can be so intimidating to me. And I didn't feel that at all with your cookbook. I felt at home and comfortable with it. They're ideas that I could work with.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, I think that food television and cookbooks are really valuable. But one of the things they've done for us has really made us feel as if, if we don't have all the ingredients, we don't have the right brand, if we don't have all the stars haven't aligned, then we're not going to be successful in a particular recipe. But this book is really meant to empower you to look at what's in your pantry and feel good about swapping one vinegar out for another or one type of mustard for another or say hey, I don't have mustard, but I do have this squeezable wasabi, there are a lot of things that will work. And if a recipe is written for somebody to cook it at home, then it should work on either side of the exact ingredients that the author has provided. So, I'm glad that you felt comfortable with this book, because it's really meant to do just that.

Laurie March

I feel like just even the substitution part makes me feel so ... It's like a relief, because a lot of times, I think cookbooks are highlighting the most special ingredients, because they're aiming for a rarefied or a unique meal. But I just don't know, especially this year, I don't know how many of us are cooking like that at the moment. Or the flip side of that, for me too is, I hate food waste. And I find, when I get all the ingredients for one special recipe guaranteed, some sad vegetable or something is dying in my fridge as a result. And I have that guilt, it's real.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, I mean, we certainly should not be wasting anything edible. And if COVID has taught us anything, it's that, what's in our pantry is a gift. And we really need to be able to make complete use of it.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Vivian Howard

the idea is, cooking with condiments, making your own condiments, they're not hard to make, making them in a relatively big batch. And then using those condiments to use all the things in your pantry or refrigerator to make really simple food exciting. I also hate food waste. I have two young children that I'm trying to teach the value of food from the person that grows it to the person who harvest it to the person that stocks it in the grocery store, food is a valuable thing, and we need to make the most of it.

Laurie March

It's so important. And I feel like growing up on a farm and near people who are growing things, gives you a very up close perspective of how hard it is to grow food, and how much effort goes into it and how long it takes to get to the farmers market or the grocery store, and that lifecycle of your food. I think you get up close and personal to it, and it is really special.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, I mean, growing up on a farm has really shown me that, although we expect to have grapes and apples and broccoli in the grocery store, all year long, like that's not necessarily a reality that we will always have. And so, it's really about looking at the things that are available to you at any given time and figuring out how to use them and how to make them tasty.

Laurie March

I love that. Vivian, for me, one of the things I really loved about your book is that it actually reads like a novel. I feel like your storytelling so much that I often sometimes forgot there was a recipe in it because the story is really anchored the why. You're talking about these condiments and for anybody who has not read this, it's these incredible recipes that you've put together, but they also add a glance, are simple, and they live in a giant jar in your fridge or your freezer, and you can call them in anytime you need them. They could top a deviled egg, they could go into a soup, they could flavor up a sauce.

Vivian Howard

And the recipes are simple. The condiment recipes, they're, three or four steps, and four or five ingredients for the most part, and they represent the way that I cook at home, which is a streamlined way to make simple foods exciting.

Laurie March

Yeah, my favorite, I have to tell you, I laughed out loud. My husband thought I was crazy, because I was reading right next to him while he was watching TV, the chicken dinner for pregnant people where you give someone the instructions for how to boss around their spouse from-

Vivian Howard

Yes.

Laurie March

... That made me laugh so hard. It's like, yes, and you really stuck to it all the way down to the end where you took the best part of the dinner and left them to deal with everything else, it was so good.

Vivian Howard

I'm so glad you read that. Yeah, that's the interesting thing about does not have to be this drive formula all the way through with ingredient list and completely boring instructions. You can change the voice of the person giving the instruction.

Laurie March

Yes and you're pretty funny in this. I feel like there's a lot of self deprecating in here. Like you're talking about Ryan winning the egg competition, I feel like you were very generous as an author, like you're ready to give to the people around you while you story tell. But you're also really sassy too. I mean, you're talking about giving shallots and garlic privacy in the pan. I mean, it's just funny. It's just funny.

Vivian Howard

Thank you. I think that there's so much more to cookbooks than just recipes. And so, I want to keep it interesting for people who have chosen to read the whole thing. So I'm glad you did.

Laurie March

So I noticed too, like for me the idea that these condiments and these flavor heroes could sit in your fridge for most of them weeks, I feel like I got to the bottom of these recipes, and I looked to see that note where you're telling us how long it lives. Because I wonder, sometimes for myself when I make a fancy recipe or something interesting, I don't want to eat it the next day or my husband doesn't want to eat the leftovers or whatever. Did the thing to your palate and then the next day you're, like, "I don't want to revisit it." But it seems like you went out of your way to make these things that could live 2, 3, 4 weeks, that could freeze for months. And again, I come back to that, like practicality of that. It was a relief to read that. It made me want to try them because I was like, "I can do that. If it can live for four months, I can do that, and it seemed simple."

Vivian Howard

Yes, absolutely. Most of these things will keep in your fridge for minimum a month. Many of them will keep indefinitely because they have so much acid or sugar in them. So that makes them more shelf stable. And the idea is, yeah, you're going to make this batch of, let's say community organizer, and you're going to use it to make dinner one night, and then it'll live in your pantry, your refrigerator for a month. And if you make several of the heroes then you have a pantry of condiments to pick from, because I'm like you, I eat something one night and it may sound like the best thing at the time. And then I want nothing to do with it for at least a week.

Laurie March

Yes, done. Worse is when my husband doesn't want to eat it too because usually he's the trash compactor. And I give him all the leftovers. But if for some reason it like didn't hit his taste buds then I'm like, "Well, crap."

Vivian Howard

Absolutely. I mean, this is all about next level meal prep.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Vivian Howard

A lot of times people on Sundays will set aside a couple of hours to like, grill chicken or roast Brussels sprouts. So they have things, that are already that they can throw together during the week and I hate.

Laurie March

Yes. I saw that in here. I have that on my notes here. I did notice a real dig, a friendly dig, but a real dig at the meal prep syndrome. I love it.

Vivian Howard

Well, I believe in meal prep, I just think we're doing it wrong. My suggestion is, like on Sunday, instead of using those hours to cook Brussels sprouts one time only to reheat later and make them worse, make one of these condiments, make two of these flavor heroes. And then you can put together dinner like a pasta or even grilled chicken with Brussels sprouts in 30 minutes and have it be exciting. If you don't

have a plan for the ingredients that you've prepped, then you really haven't done much to make sure that what you're going to be eating is delicious.

Laurie March

Or it gets wasted again.

Vivian Howard

Right.

Laurie March

It sounds like you're making these things at your own house all the time, do you think that this has simplified your shopping list for your pantry in some measurable way?

Vivian Howard

Absolutely. Rather than spending 30 minutes on the sauce and condiment aisle, I basically get the same thing at the grocery store every time I go. I get a pack of ground turkey, I get a whole chicken, I get some either pork chop or steak, a sliceable quick cooking meat. I always get a package of broccoli, a head of cabbage, a box of spinach, always a cucumber, a head of Romaine lettuce, I always have three types of dried beans in my cupboard, I have white and brown rice, and then I use my flavor heroes to put those things together in a novel new way and there you go. So, I don't even think at the grocery store, really, it's just about the things that we always get.

Laurie March

I love that. I feel just the ease of that, you could send somebody else to the grocery store on your behalf with your list. You already know what you have, you have that consistency, some of that panic at 5:00 o'clock, that thing that rolls up the back of your spine when you realize you're responsible for feeding somebody else. You can't just eat the peanut butter and the crackers, other humans need you or you're doing that that evening.

Laurie March

I feel like a lot of us really struggle to stock a pantry. I grew up with just boxed food. I grew up in Maryland. My parents weren't into cooking, we didn't do the, live to eat, we did the eat to live. So for a long time, I didn't know ... If it wasn't in a box, I didn't really eat it. So, it's just learning about food and discovering fresh ingredients. Sometimes you can go too far with that. Well, I can't tell you how many times you get these saucer eyes in the grocery store. Bring home so many beautiful things and you realize that you just over-shopped, don't have time to make it. And then if you're not savvy enough to know how to put it up, do something with it so you're not wasting it and you just feel like a jerk.

but frozen vegetables and fruits are a great alternative. And in some cases even better, because when you're harvesting something to freeze it, it's harvested at the exact right time and it's preserved before it has the opportunity to go bad.

Laurie March

Yeah, that's a good point.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, frozen fruits and vegetables, a great thing that I generally always have in my freezer, are this vegetable medley; string beans, corn, and maybe lima beans all frozen together. And that's great for throwing into pasta or soup or any baked casserole. And it's like no prep necessary. So I think that's a great option.

Laurie March

So, chef, you have paired your ingredients down to a place where it sounds like your shopping is simple. But I'm wondering about the rest of your kitchen. For those of us who don't have the experience of setting up restaurants, even just your experience of the live events that you have done where you've had to cook in other people's locations. I know how hard that is. I used to be a maitre d, so I've worked in a restaurant. I know how hard it is to do things off site. So I'm wondering if we can steal from your wisdom here. Can you tell us a little bit about how you have borrowed some of these things from your industrial kitchen ideas and brought them home to your own? Like what do you do at home that you know is inspired by your kitchen experience?

Vivian Howard

Well, a lot of what I do at home that's inspired by my kitchen experience is in the opposite direction of what you would expect. At the restaurant, I can use eight to 10 saute pans or bowls or whatever to make a dish but at home, because I'm washing the dishes, I take great pains to cook like in one pack.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Vivian Howard

So, you'll see a lot of the recipes in this book are me roasting a chicken on top of cauliflower or on top of a big slice of crusty bread or on top of rice or grits. And that's a means to just make dinner in one pan and also not waste everything that chicken has to give as it roast. So, that certainly informed by my experience at the restaurant. Another thing that I'm always amazed when I go into my friends kitchens who love to cook and spend a lot of time in their kitchen is that they're working on a tiny little cutting board and they have a dull knife, and they have maybe 10 knives but they're all dull. So I love at home, just like at work, a big cutting board that gives me space to push my ingredients around and give them space on my counter. I always have a sharp knife at all the places that I cook one knife you don't need 10,000 you just need one that feels good in your hand and that you know how to put an edge on.

Laurie March

I like that.

Vivian Howard

Those are two things that I think everybody could benefit from. Another thing that translates to my home kitchen is this idea of mise en place. In a restaurant, if we're going to make a pasta dish, we're going to have all the little ingredients right there in front of us, so that we can toss the pasta together very quickly. And at home, I try to do that, but I'm not always successful because of kids or whatever. But always, next to my stove, I have the things that I use most often at the ready.

Laurie March

What's there?

Vivian Howard

So I have Diamond Crystals kosher salt, a common basic olive oil that I use when I'm salting, I have a little tub of bacon fat there, I have my pepper mill, and I have a grapeseed oil, which is a flavorless oil, and we have a little bottle of hot sauce. Because that's something that we'll add at the end. But those things are there on my counter in attractive containers at the ready, so that ... They just live there and they make sense there.

Laurie March

You got that convenience factor where you're pulling out the other things you need, but some of those things you use over and over are truly at your fingertips.

Vivian Howard

Right.

Laurie March

I love that. You sound like you have thought about all of this so much. Does that creep out into other parts of your life? Do you find this sort of organization? I know that you have had just a massively busy schedule with what you've done. Does any of this organization creep into other places for you?

Vivian Howard

I would like to say that it does. But if you could see my car right now, you'd see it's not correct into that.

Laurie March

Mine either.

Vivian Howard

I tend to be very compartmentalized in my life and work. And, I've spent so much time in the kitchen that I think that is probably the most organized part of my life.

Laurie March

Awesome, that's a great place to be super organized. I think people forget how much the kitchen functions as the heart of everyone's home. You're in it several times a day, that's where your water bottle gets refilled, that's where the trash lives, just your recycling, so many things happen in the kitchen. People are doing homework in the kitchen now. And working from the island. It's such an important space to take the time to make it work for you.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, and it gets so much traffic. It's like, how can you set your kitchen up to really work for you and your family?

Laurie March

Yeah. What do you suggest for that, chef? If somebody is looking around their kitchen and they are just, they feel like it's driving them up a wall? Do you have any suggestions for just quick thoughts where they could get started on making it work better?

Vivian Howard

Yeah, well, I did this a couple months ago, I went through all of my cabinets and pulled out the things that I've not used in the last six months. So, I have a lot of pots and pans, but I really only used about four of them. So I got rid of everything else and took it to a yard sale. And I think getting the things out that we don't use, I guess the proper way to say it is that things that don't bring us joy-

Laurie March

You heard that before?

Vivian Howard

... yeah, makes room for us to see the things that we would maybe like or would make cooking more seamless.

Laurie March

Yeah. I love that.

Vivian Howard

And, I think also moving things around in the kitchen, I don't think we should be afraid of change in the way we function in our kitchens. The place where my trash is does not work for me. So one of the things I've asked for in the new year is to move the trash because it is right in the center of where we want to work. And so when a kid comes by to drop their trash off, everybody has to move.

Laurie March

Right, I think that's so important. I actually redesigned my kitchen recently. And the location of the cutting board, I think should be to the left of the trash can or to the right of the trash can so you can just pull out the trash and scrape off your stuff, right?

Vivian Howard

You're right.

Laurie March

And I believe that, for me, I was excited to put my knives in a drawer because, I don't know, something about the knife block just drives me bonkers. I find myself eternally moving it around the countertop, and so I thought about if I was standing there, well, then to the right of me, I wanted the knives to be in that drawer. So I didn't have to move myself to get a knife or to pull out the trash. And I started my design from there. And it just felt like I could picture myself. There are stove tasks, and there are chopping, organizing ... And actually, I would separate that.

Laurie March

There're organizing tasks, like when you bring your groceries in. And then there's the choppy tasks and meal prep. And then right under that, I was like, "This is exactly where my Tupperware needs to live." Because once I'm done with all this stuff, I want to be able to pull out that drawer and put all the storage stuff straight to where it needs to go. So-

Vivian Howard

Yeah. I think that's really smart thinking about the way you work in your kitchen and plotting that out. And just because a drawer has forks and spoons in it now doesn't mean that you can't change the way the house is.

Laurie March

Yeah.

Vivian Howard

So you're the master of your space

Laurie March

Master of your own domain.

Vivian Howard

Yes.

Laurie March

I read my way through your book, and I really did notice that you were talking about feeling like you had become a character on the Chef's Life show, and that you're a people pleaser, and I could really relate to that. But I feel like that must be just exhausting. And my impression with this book is that you seem to have come out of that a little bit, and this book is people pleasing. I hope people are telling you that. This book was so pleasing to me, I really enjoyed it, cover to cover. But do you feel like you're a reformed people pleaser in some ways?

Vivian Howard

I think being a people pleaser is in my DNA. So, it'll never go away. But I've realized that I'm also one of those people that I need to try and please, and really writing this book and having it be such a departure from Deep Run Roots, and like what everybody thinks they know of me as this country girl. And I've, for a long time, felt like I was so much more and that I had been put in this box and was expected to just say, "Yeah, that's who I am. I am exactly who you want me to be." And I just got to a place where I couldn't do that anymore. And it was finding its way into all parts of my life. So I think as you get older, you do accept that I'm not going to please everybody, I'm not going to make everybody happy, but I'm also tired of being the last person that I try to please.

Laurie March

Yes, you said a line in the book. I wrote it down, you said, "My hunger to please had starved me." And I feel like so many of us are trying to be so many things for ourselves and for other people. And you mentioned earlier imposter syndrome. I have seen the list of awards that you have, holy cow, if you

think you're an imposter. But I think you're talking about something that a lot of us have been feeling, certainly this year, I think people have been talking about imposter syndrome more than ever. And I'm wondering if that's something that, 2021 will help us all continue to just believe in ourselves a little bit more.

Vivian Howard

Yeah, I hope so. My imposter syndrome has always been related to not feeling as if I'm good enough at something to really be recognized for it. And I think what we've learned in this last year, is that maybe the set of guidelines that have been presented to us as to what looks successful, and what is the right way to do X, Y and Z is absolutely maybe not accurate. And hopefully we will re-examine the work that we do and find the value that is inherent there because yeah, I'm just like you, I feel so insecure about much of my work. But then I look at the accomplishments that I've had and there must be something there.

Laurie March

You're describing in the book, the most spectacular sweet potato chowder, which I think might be the first thing I cook from your cookbook. But you're talking about the conversation about balance that a lot of female chefs get asked this question. Here are all these things you do, it's amazing, how do you find balance? You almost have to roll your eyes at it when you hear it. Because to your point in the book, I don't think people are asking a lot of male chefs how they find balance. And that just struck me, your quote in there was, "Balance is boring, seek satisfaction instead." And I would love to leave you with this question, chef, are you satisfied today?

Vivian Howard

I'm getting there. The balance question is something that I think is generally reserved for women. And I have struggled as a mother knowing that I'm putting a lot of energy into my career, and sometimes more into my career than my children, and then sometimes more into my children than my career and it never really equals out. But, I feel best and like the best mother that I can be, and the best chef that I can be when I put a lot of energy into something. And it's never balanced.

Laurie March

Yeah, it's better all around. Chef, this has been such a pleasure. I want to thank you so much for spending time with us. And it was really just a joy.

Vivian Howard

Thank you. It was a joy talking to you, too.

Laurie March

And I also want to say a huge thank you to all our listeners, I'm beyond thrilled that so many NEW friends are joining us! On the next episode, I'm talking with American culinary historian Adrian Miller, about African America's role in presidential food service and soul food's place in American cuisine history.

Adrian Miller

Oh, so I think it's hugely important because one, I'm just a big cheerleader for my traditional food. And one of the reasons why I do the writing that I do is I'm just looking around, I'm like, "Well, why is that group's cuisine celebrated and not mine? Why is there so much hate for my traditional food?" So, I'm a big cheerleader for that and I just don't think people appreciate how much African-Americans have shaped American food,

Laurie March

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