

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 1 - Welcome To Our Food Journey™

Ron DeSantis: So I think good food is not exclusive to fine-dining restaurants. Good food can be found across all segments of the industry.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. In each episode we will feature conversations with people who are making a difference in how we create and think about food. We're going to talk to a lot of different people, from midwestern farmers to food entrepreneurs, and from master chefs to parents preparing dinners for their families. What we're hoping to get across in this series of conversations is that we're all players in an interconnected food system, and we all deserve a place at the table.

I'm Ethan Waters. I'm a journalist who writes about identity and culture and I'm excited to help curate these discussions. I'm learning more and more about the critical place food has within our culture and how our changing tastes and preferences can tell a lot about our past, present and future. In these times of globalization and concerns over sustainability of our natural resources, food becomes an ever more important topic.

In this introductory episode of Our Food Journey™, I wanted to introduce you to someone who's going to be leading many of these conversations. Ron DeSantis is a Certified Master Chef. As you'll hear, Ron has worked in fine restaurants, cooked for presidents, and has been a teacher at one of America's top culinary academies. But that's only part of what makes him special; Ron could've stayed in the world of high cuisine, but instead he's used his expertise in places not normally associated with great food. He's been a chef for marines, he's consulted with airlines so that you can get better meals in flight. He's been the director of culinary excellence at a major university where he oversaw the creation of fourteen thousand meals every day. He's devoted to the idea that great food should be available to all, and that is the idea that gets to the heart of what these podcasts are all about.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Chef Ron DeSantis.

Ron, thanks for joining me.

Ron: It is my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Ethan: So why are we doing this? Why are we talking about food now, and what are we hoping to get out of this?

Ron: This is an opportunity for us, really, to do a variety of things. One is to keep the food conversation going. It's to help us archive what's happening at this period of time. And it gives us a chance to learn about Hormel and what a great company Hormel is and that big food is not bad food, that there are great people behind the scenes, that there are great foods coming from such a large company, but also their focus on quality and employees is one of their hallmarks.

Ethan: It occurs to me that cooking and food is so important as a communication culture and it takes us over time. And this particular moment in history seems to be really vibrant with innovation. People from

different areas, you know, coming in. Tech coming in and influencing cooking, certainly innovations in agriculture—you look all around you and you see remarkable movement at this moment in history.

Ron: It is. It's a very fun time to be in the food business, and it's a very exciting time. It's always been an exciting time to be in the food business, but now more so because, you know, through the advent of food programs on television, which seem so archaic and quaint these days, to all the ways that we can access things that interest us about food, it's just blown everything wide open. People are open to things, people are looking for things, people are really interested in having that food exploration, that food journey.

Ethan: So, you're going to be our guide, a little bit, on these Food Journeys™ episodes. We need to know a little bit more about you, your background, and some turning points in your life. Could you give us a brief history?

Ron: Sure, sure. My um, when you get older you have the luxury of being able to look back and realize certain things, it's like oh, how come I get food? Well, back then I was lucky to grow up in a family that the only thing we ate was fresh food, because that's what my Italian grandparents knew, and that's what my father and my mother—my mother is an immigrant also—and that's what they knew. And so you grow up with those things. So I get involved. I realize now that was kind of that foundation.

I joined the service and they trained me to be a cook. I had a great time and an unbelievable experience doing that. From there, when I was discharged, I went to the Culinary Institute of America and got very serious about the profession and the craft. From there I took a job in Europe and lived there and worked there for five years honing the craft, understanding different culture, understanding foods—things of that nature—and came back to the United States and really wanted to share that with others and was fortunate to get a great career in the Culinary Institute of America, and that that gave lots of opportunities to do things because that's the kind of place where you always got to see new things. You got to see different foods you got to experience things, set trends. Those are the kinds of things that helped me to realize that, you know, it was great to know the craft, but at the same time you had to embrace the rest of the food world as well. You had to be inquisitive and you had to be open-minded and broad-thinking about not just the food but the cultures that were behind them.

So those are things that really got me to this point and I'm extremely fortunate to have had that experience. And then from there, just to wrap this up, I had a chance to change directions, and I wanted to move into operations and that's where I was director of culinary excellence for all food operations at Yale University—and that's fourteen thousand meals a day at very very high quality, restaurant quality—and that was a whole other set of learning, plus being able to put things that I had learned and taught into practice on a daily basis.

Ethan: One of the things I like about your bio is it includes culinary experiences that you wouldn't put at the top of the list in “high end.” So soldiers, students, people on airplanes—like these are three places where you'd say the food is going to be bad, and you have this belief about food and technology these days that seems to suggest that those places can be raised up.

Ron: They can be, and there's no reason that they shouldn't be. To me, I helped an entrepreneur launch a group of sandwich shops. Sandwich shops, the same idea: how can we make this a great sandwich, and that's what we focused on. We were able to achieve that. Working in inflight catering, how could we

make really good food at thirty three thousand feet? So it's a matter of choosing ingredients and choosing techniques and choosing, you know, smart menu items that can handle that kind of rethermalization system. So yes, you can have great food in different places, you know, it's a matter of putting your mind to it and thinking about what do I need to do and what are my resources to make that happen? So I think good food is not exclusive to fine dining restaurants. Good food can be across all segments of the industry.

Ethan: In all segments of the socioeconomic spectrum there should be—

Ron: True! If you really look at it, you know, for the most part you go to a supermarket, food's kind of affordable. Depending on what you want to buy and where you go shopping, you can get good quality food for a very reasonable price. And that's the kind of thing that you want to be able to find. And prepared food is really, really good quality. But at the same time, it's got to be affordable, so that it's not a splurge, “once in a while I'll go there,” it's something where I can go there often and know that I'm going to have great tasting food. And food, you know, if it's great tasting, generally, is nourishing as well.

Ethan: So you have years of experience in the culinary education world. I'm curious, looking back when you began working with the CIA, first as a student and then as a professor, what changes in the idea of what people do at culinary school have happened over that time? Have there been new trends? Has it become less specific about being that chef in that fine restaurant?

Ron: The students coming in now, they are aware that there are other opportunities, and that's a good thing. I'm really happy that they realize you don't have to be a restaurant chef. Because we need people in research, we need culinary in manufacturing, we need culinary in the hotels and inflight catering, all of these things, you know.

There are so so many options that are out there, so they're coming in with the understanding that there are more options. The thing is, that I experienced over the years of teaching, is that it feels like the students coming in now are more inquisitive. I love it. I think that is the best thing that can happen to education. I don't care what area of education it is because if young people are coming in more inquisitive, that means that that professor has to always be looking at what's coming up. Has to always be learning new things because this thing you learned today, in twenty years you can't keep saying the same thing in twenty years. You have to understand what's evolving and what's going on.

Now that said, how you simmer a stock, well, that didn't change in twenty years. It didn't change as long as they've been recording this stuff. Which is ok, and there are some fundamentals and some foundations. Maybe in music it's the same way, maybe in certain things, you know, there are certain things that always happen pretty much the same way. But beyond that, what do you do with a stock, ok, and we used to do certain things in classical and french cooking... Today stocks are looked at a little bit differently, you know, because you start looking at ramen and you look at foie, you look at those kinds of broth bowls and bone broths and suddenly stocks have become this foundation of so many different things, and it's not just turned into a sauce or a simple soup. They're very very complex, so if you're the culinary instructor, the professor, and you're not realizing or staying with this and going out and eating these things and trying new... That's not good.

The students, I think, really help to push that along, and that's, in some ways, helping the professors there in culinary arts to continue to be innovative and find out what they don't know. And

yeah, I think that probably one of the biggest changes is how inquisitive they are. They're real comfortable asking why five times, but it's not always asking why five times about the same things. When you get through those, ok, I get that. Why this now? And why this now? I think it's fantastic.

Ethan: So as I mentioned, Chef Ron will be back with us on future podcasts, talking with many tastemakers and influencers in the food world. Please join us again on Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. And for more information on Hormel Foods and our engagement with our customers and partners, please visit hormelfoods.com.