

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 10 - Finding What You Love

Wilson Tang: You know, on 9/11 I was in Two World Trade Center when that tragedy happened. I was lucky enough to escape the building, but it was definitely a turning point in my career because I instantaneously made this decision that, like, you know what? I have to do what I love.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to another episode of Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. Not long ago, Master Chef Ron DeSantis spent the day walking through New York's Chinatown with restaurateur Wilson Tang. Tang is one of the new generation of businesspeople bringing energy and innovation to the Lower Manhattan food scene.

Tang's first career might have led him in another direction entirely. He was working in a financial firm in the World Trade Center on September eleventh, 2001. Like many survivors, those attacks led him to reassess what he wanted to do with his life, and he was drawn back to working in his family's restaurant business. With the blessing of his uncle, Tang became the proprietor of the famed Nom Wah Tea Parlor. Nom Wah is a Chinatown institution, and the first place in Manhattan to serve dim sum. Tang has recently opened several other venues and is innovating ways to introduce the Nom Wah brand to new audiences. We hope you enjoy this conversation with Wilson Tang.

Ron: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a Hormel Podcast. I'm certified Master Chef Ron DeSantis and I am sitting here with restaurateur Wilson Tang from Nom Wah, and there are more than one so we'll get into that in a moment. Wilson, welcome.

Wilson: Thanks for having me.

Ron: The food is delicious downstairs. I realized that thirty years ago a friend of mine brought me to this. I called him up, he just called me back and said, this is the place. I just can't believe that I'm sitting here today. So I have to know about this, I think someone said it's a turnip cake.

Wilson: Yes.

Ron: That is delicious.

Wilson: Yeah—

Ron: The texture is right, everything works on that, I mean, it's just turnips?

Wilson: Yes, so it's fine-grated turnips or radish that we use. There's a little bit of flour in it, but I think what gives it the flavor and the texture is the dried baby shrimps, the mushroom, really finely cut. It's the Chinese sausage that's in there. It's actually a pretty complicated process. We steam everything until it's very soft and we add in all the ingredients, and then after it's steamed through, it goes through a cooling process where it comes out of a mold and we're able to cut it into squares. And if you're doing the wok version, we cut that even smaller into cubes, and we run that through a fryer and then just really quick,

like a flash-fry, and then we pull it up and we put it through a wok with an xo sauce, which is dried scallops, it's got pork bits in it and it's this lengthy process of steam, fry, wok that really gives it a good flavour. It gives a texture like you said, and it's just a good looking dish as well.

Ron: How did you end up in the food world, working as a chef, a restaurateur?

Wilson: Yeah, so, you know, growing up as a son of immigrant parents, the restaurant industry was definitely somewhere where my parents wanted me far away from. They felt that I needed to go to school, get my degree, and join the workforce. But I think it's just kind of in my DNA of sorts, because, you know, my dad has been in the restaurant business forever. After immigrating to the US, that's what immigrants do. You come to a new country and you don't know the language and it kind of stuck with me.

Like I see part of it as cooking and eating, but part of it also is like the hospitality side of it, seeing people eating and smiling. It really kind of makes me have that warm fuzzy feeling, and seeing people interact with each other at a restaurant table is, these are things that, at this point in my career, I don't need to be a waiter or work in the kitchen, but I really do enjoy watching these moments as people eat and enjoy the food and I hear them talking and laughing. And these are all reasons why I do it. I draw a lot of joy seeing other people eat and be happy.

Ron: You probably had some very happy times at the table growing up. What are some of those? Are there any memories that are fun to tell us about?

Wilson: I have so many memories. Growing up in Chinatown, having dim sum on the weekends was a major event. Every weekend, either Saturday or Sunday the whole family will come to one of the big box locations and we'll get a number, we wait and we'll get seated. Sometimes we're sharing a table with another family, sometimes we have our own table, but I have all these vivid memories of dim sum carts with all these different kinds of delicacies roaming around the restaurant, and you would kind of carry the ticket—how they calculated your bill—and you would just walk to these people like, I want this, and the aromas, the fact that you're eating with your eyes made it such an enjoyable time for us.

And typically tables in Chinese culture, round tables, so it fits more people and you can see everyone around you and it was just always about checking in with each other, how is school going and what are you working on this week? I kind of miss those days because I'm older now and my parents are around, but we don't really have time to do that family routine anymore.

But yeah, tons of memories, a lot of food moments, trying out different cuisines in Chinatown, different, as time went on, like different ethnic Chinese foods. There's Szechuan style, there is Fujianese style food, and all of these different regions of China have their own specialties, and that was always an exciting moment to try, you know, noodles from Xi'an and you know, hot pot from from from another place, Taiwanese food, and all of that has come full circle for me.

Ron: That's actually great conversation. Stay with that for just a moment, because it sounds like we're at a point that it's not Chinese food anymore. It's going to become Szechuanese, it's going to become other... And it's interesting for me to hear you say you explored those as well in Chinatown, so is that something that you're seeing, or is it something you'd like to see? Where are we with that?

Wilson: You know, that part is as strong as ever. I think when people think of Chinese food it's very narrow and it's typically Cantonese style or—

Ron: Is that what we would typically, like me as an American growing up here, would it be cantonese, pretty much?

Wilson: Right. So either Cantonese because cantonese, the people from Canton in China, were kind of like the first wave of immigrants to America, so a lot of the old school restaurants would be Cantonese-based, so you know, food from the south, dim sum is underneath this cantonese umbrella, but as time goes on, and as food has made this big comeback with social media, with food network, top chef, all these different shows, Cooking Network, and all of these things has brought food up into this pedestal.

Now we can really dive in and get really specific into different regions of China where, you know, people of the north, they like spicier foods, probably because it was colder in the north, and eating the spicy food warms the body during cold weather. So it's been a really enjoyable time for me, especially now where we can really dive into these towns, like even you know the food of Taiwan has made a big comeback, and Taiwanese food, and Taiwanese food culture and street food. That all is so popular now in New York, as well as Shanghainese food and Szechuan food, and even local, like right here on Doyers Street, we're surrounded by people from the region of Fujian, which is a coastal town and there's a lot of seafood involved, a lot of noodles involved, so it's an exciting time in Chinatown and it's an exciting time in Chinese food culture.

Ron: What you're telling me is absolutely inspiring as a chef. Sitting downstairs in your restaurant just now, having you tell me some of the story, I feel very privileged to experience these things, and the ability to use and to learn more about what the cultures are and the nuances in the differences in the different regions and towns, even.

Wilson: Yeah, and you know what we all talk about it is just one country, one continent, and there's just so many more and even just for Chinese food, we could talk forever for it and we still wouldn't be done.

Ron: I heard you telling a story. Before you got into the food business you were in finance...

Wilson: I, of course, was working for a financial firm at the time, right out of college, and you know, on 9/11 I was in Two World Trade Center when the tragedy happened. I was lucky enough to escape the building. I remember going down, and how the elevators work, I was on the seventy fourth floor and then—

Ron: You were up there.

Wilson: Yeah. So from seventy four is an express elevator that takes you to forty four, and then from forty four it's all local elevators, so I took the seventy four down to forty four to change to a local. And at that point, though, you have to walk. Just walk. Down the stairs. So I'm walking walking walking, and then I'm down to sixteen and on the PA, it's like yeah, it's safe to go back, and people were walking back up. I guess call me a kid, but I just try to milk the clock. At that point in my life, you know, it was early twenties, whatever it was, I'm like I'm just gonna go downstairs, and I was almost in Chinatown that it hit

the second building. And then when the buildings fell, I was already way uptown. None of the trains were working.

I was living in Queens at the time. It wasn't until I got home that, wow, I kind of, like... Thank God I didn't go back upstairs. But it was definitely a turning point in my career because I instantaneously made this decision that, you know what? I have to do what I love. As much as my parents like me to have a corporate job, where I lived what they called the American Dream, it's Monday through Friday, nine to five, and you go to the office and you go about your day, you have your lunch, and that just wasn't satisfying for me, and going into the restaurant business, my parents were super upset about it. And the story is, we put you through all this school, we work so hard as immigrants to pay a way through high school and part of college, why do you want to go back into the restaurant business? It's such a tough career, it's such a grueling... Long hours, little pay, but I think what my parents overlooked is, running a restaurant today is so different from running a restaurant from when my dad was doing it.

I'm marrying what I know, my experiences with technology, because technology has been a big piece of our business, and the fact that you know our store has been around for a long time, there's a lot of legacy and history about it, and when I decided to take over Nom Wah, I just saw this chance that I can keep old New York old New York, and with that, and just a little bit of social media—and that was when Facebook was just starting up—and I remember where I was like, I'm going to document the process of reviving this old parlour.

And someone reached out, similar to your story, this lady Gretchen reached out to me to say, I was at this restaurant when I was eight years old and it is amazing that you are second generation and kind of bringing it back to life. And lucky enough, she was an editor at a newspaper, the Daily News here in New York, and she was like, hey, when you get this up and running we need to do a story about the reopening of the tea parlour. And lo and behold, I'm in the Sunday Daily News with my hands crossed and posing proud, and there's the picture of me in the middle of this... People still read newspapers, and boom, it's my picture in the Daily News, and that just set off a chain of news and luck and it all just kind of worked out where it brought the people back in masses. Because everyone has a story about New York, everyone at some point, oh I lived in New York, I went to law school, oh my dad had a business, we're native New Yorkers but we moved down to Florida but we went to the tea parlour religiously, and—

Ron: Then I walk in today and say, I was here thirty years ago!

Wilson: It's like it's like deja vu for a lot of people, and that that kick-off was really what brought the tea parlour alive again, and it was the longevity of it, it's God bless my uncle who is still alive and kicking today, who did not want to change a thing. Old school. Like, hey you know his saying was, if it's not broken don't fix it, and that's why we have an intact restaurant, an iconic restaurant that goes back to the twenties and has the look and feel of a movie shoot, because when you walk in you're instantly transformed to a 1950s diner, and it is on the same level of icon as Katz's delicatessen in the Lower East Side, or Russ & Daughters in the Lower East Side as well, so those are the three places that are iconic to me in Lower Manhattan.

Ron: That is such a great story. I'm going to switch a little bit, put on your corporate hat, your big business hat, because big food. Hormel's big food, and I've been working with Hormel for a bunch of projects, for probably more than ten years now, and I never thought of them as big food. I just recently started to use the word big food. I always saw them as good food, big company, good food, just they

knew they made really good things and they had a lot of great values that matched mine, so these days, can big food be good food? What message do you give to big food as they're finding their way through social media and word of mouth and all of those.

Wilson: I think transparency is key. I look at canned food, just in the history of it, you know it being a staple for the armed forces, right? All of that stuff is quite vital to our country and our society, and it was great for a while because there's not much innovation going on in the food space, but then as innovation started it turned a little negative.

And I think now it's making a comeback, canned foods, because canned foods can actually be good food. And just with our recipe testing, with the things that we do here, there's a lot of stuff that's still canned. That doesn't necessarily mean it's bad. We're in such a fast-paced world, and convenience is key, and I think we proved that we can get big flavors out of food that came in a can. And I'm a big supporter of it. I've used it all my life, honestly. Even the beef stew that we made, and the chicken, this chicken dish that we made, all of that stuff brings me back to my childhood, and I'm happy to see that it has a place now as a category.

Ron: That's great. So I am going to ask some of these kinds of questions for young chefs, young entrepreneurs. What do you tell them?

Wilson: Well, I think with media, it has brought cooking and chefs onto a pedestal, like, oh you're a chef? Awesome. You cook? Great. But I think my advice, or my statement is you really need to do it for the passion of it. You really need to put in your time into learning the techniques, into figuring out how a kitchen works. As easy as it sounds, oh you cook food, it's so intricate. How you store things, how to keep food safe, how to properly keep a kitchen clean. You have to have a lot of patience and you need to really put in the time.

It's a career where you often put other people first, so you're in the service industry, you're serving your customers, right? And it's really a selfless kind of career, and we all know, cooking, the pay is not great. And it's really gotta be passion-based and you really need to honestly like putting your time in to learn the technique, whichever cuisine you go into. Learn the cuisine and be patient and wait for your opportunity to move up. I don't spend too much time in the kitchen, but even one of the stations is making a rice noodle out of broken down rice, water rice we call it, even that little technique of ladling this stuff onto a handkerchief and spreading out this rice water to let it steam into a noodle... I mean, it takes months of training to perfect just that one technique out of dozens of techniques, so it is definitely not a career for young chefs, oh yeah, I'm going to be a *chef*. You gotta be a cook first. And then, hopefully, if you put in the time you can be a chef.

Ron: You have to get the bug. You have to get bitten by the bug, and it can be a tremendous, tremendous lifestyle.

Wilson: Yeah.

Ron: Because I think it really becomes a lifestyle. Wilson, this was really a lot of fun talking to you. I enjoyed listening and your insight is actually fantastic.

Wilson: Thanks for having me.

Ron: You're very welcome. It was our pleasure to have you. This is Our Food Journey™ podcast by Hormel foods. For more information, hormelfoods.com. This is certified Master Chef Ron DeSantis. Until next time.