

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 3 - From Hell's Kitchen to Napa Valley

Christina Machamer: You know, there's no difference between you and me as a chef. Everybody screws up. The difference is I know how to fix it.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. On this podcast we feature conversations with all sorts of influencers and tastemakers in our food system. In the last decade there's been a resurgence of interest in food shows on TV. On any given week, networks produce over 400 hours of cooking shows. Many of these are competition shows where chefs go head to head. Today, Master Chef Ron DeSantis interviews someone who knows a lot about these shows and the ways that they have influenced food trends in our culture. She's Christina Machamer. She's a rising star in the world of food and wine. Chef Christina was the winner of the fourth season of Hell's Kitchen and went on to work side by side with chef Gordon Ramsay in his restaurant in West Hollywood. After that, she had the privilege of assisting chef Thomas Keller in opening Bouchon Bistro in Beverly Hills. She now resides in Napa Valley and has become a certified sommelier. We Hope you enjoy this conversation with chef Christina Machamer.

Ron DeSantis: We're here in the tasting room of Hall Winery in the middle of Napa Valley and it is my pleasure to welcome chef Christina Machamer.

Christina: Thank you so much, Ron. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ron: Christina, I'm going to dive right into the big question for me. You won the fourth season of Hell's Kitchen. I need to know everything about it.

Christina: Oh my gracious. Well, everything, Ron, how much time do you have? Let's narrow it down. Two questions that you really want answered and don't ask me if Gordon's really like that in real life.

Ron: No, I wouldn't.

Christina: Ok, perfect.

Ron: That wasn't on my list. Because I'm going to believe he's not.

Christina: All right, good.

Ron: Anyhow, so if there was one really big learning experience, what was that?

Christina: Oh, gracious, there were so many different learning experiences, but the number one—and I think this is true of any competition that you're going to enter—is think through it. So I may not be the best chef on that show or the best chef in our new reality, but I'm a strategic planner, and so I'm constantly looking at the methodology and trying to find ways I can fail, accounting for those variables and then

moving beyond them. So I'm constantly thinking, "I don't know how to fail, here are certain vulnerabilities I might have and this is the way I work around."

Ron: That's actually a super good insight for anybody that's listening. And the other part is was the cooking real?

Christina: The cooking is real, the emotions are real and, you know, Ron here's the thing about an interesting dynamic of this show: there's certain culinary competitions that are very focused in a certain direction. In this regard, you had no idea what was coming at you. You always knew to expect the unexpected, and for me, I felt very challenged. I mean, I was given ingredients that made no sense—egg, crab, bell pepper, anchovy—and told to make a dish, and so it's not things that really make sense. So I really had to go back to the basics, and I was thankful that I was in culinary school at the time and think, how can I demonstrate a technique or a mastery of a skill, put these together in a way that makes sense so that I can progress in this competition?

Ron: No, that's really, really good. So are these kinds of opportunities—because there's different competitions that that we see throughout different networks—are they changing the food culture, and if they are, in what way are they changing it?

Christina: I think you have to say yes, you know, sitting here in a chef coat with you, it's kind of weird to say "I never grew up wanting to be a chef." This just sort of happened to me. It was an opportunity that I grabbed onto, and luckily I was pretty good at it, but you know, kids nowadays, and I get a lot of them reaching out to me, young kids, six years old, that want to be a chef and it's inspiring. It's interesting. I think people care about food, they understand a lot more about technique and presentation, and I think it's making us a lot more aware as a consumptionist, but also it's bringing the home chef and giving them some basic skill sets that really elevate cuisine, not only out in the public and for young aspiring chefs, but at home as well. These kinds of competition shows aren't just changing the awareness for aspiring chefs and people in the industry, but they're also really bringing it home to the home chef. So teaching them techniques and making them aware of ingredients and how the product is created and really elevating the cuisine that we see at home.

Ron: You mentioned that you didn't plan on being a chef. I didn't plan on being a chef, either. I joined the military, and they said, you're going to be a cook. And it worked, because I'm still sitting here doing these kinds of things. So you weren't planning that, but how early did food have an influence on you, or what influenced you to say, I want to go and do something in the food world?

Christina: So, Ron, now that I look back, hindsight is 20/20. There's a baby picture of me sitting with this, like, horrible 1980s linoleum and I'm playing with this orange spatula and a wooden bowl. My family found video of me doing a demonstration on how to make a pie. I'm so young I can't reach the counter—I have to get up and down off of a chair. When I was in college, I was studying political science and criminology as part of my pre-law program, and I was the only sorority sister that did dinner parties for twelve regularly, so food has always been a part of my life.

My mom's a nurse, she works a lot, so we had to learn how to do things ourselves if we wanted to eat. And food was one of those things in our household, you know, we didn't have the most money

growing up, so there was always food in the fridge, you never argued about it, and if you didn't want to eat what mom made, then that's too bad. You could just starve. So food was always a really big influence, but really never something I saw on the horizon of my career until it kind of happened.

Ron: But I'm kind of curious, what kind of food memories can you tell us about?

Christina: Ok, all right. So my parents are divorced, right? And my dad on his weekends, he really wants to impress my brother and I and, you know, I mentioned we didn't have a ton of money growing up, but on his weekends we could go to the grocery store and my dad would let us buy whatever we wanted. So if we wanted to get lobster for dinner, we could do that. And my brother and I, we've always been in competition. He's five years younger than me, and we'd always try to one up one another, so I mean, who's going to gross the other person out by eating the fish eyes, the fish cheeks, eating the weirdest, grossest things, and so even from childhood, it was always you experiment. And so that's sort of one of those food memories that I have, and I think if we didn't have the ability to go explore the grocery store for the most esoteric ingredients, or what we think they are back at six years old, I may not have been as open to food as I am today.

Ron: That's great. So you've worked with some world-class chefs, and, you know, obviously Gordon Ramsay is one of them, so what are the characteristics of a great mentor in a professional kitchen?

Christina: So I love this question and I really want to rewind it a couple of years before Gordon Ramsay. I apprenticed before going to culinary school for Larry Forgione, who I know you know, and at that point Larry was probably the biggest celebrity chef that I had ever worked for—the godfather of American cuisine. So I really wanted to kind of pick his brain and get the inside track before I go to CIA because I think I'm going to be behind everyone. And I said, you know, Larry, what are some pointers that you can give me? And he said, you know, there's no difference between you and me as a chef. Everybody screws up. The difference is I know how to fix it.

And as I progressed in my career, whenever we would have a break from school, I would go back and help out in the kitchen at an American place and, you know, I'm about halfway through the culinary program and I said, you know, Larry, what should I do after graduation? And he said, go work for the best chef that will have you. And so that's what I did, even in a roundabout way, you know. He didn't say go on a reality television show and work for the best chef that will have you, but that's what I always strive to do in my culinary career.

Ron: He's such a wonderful individual, an unbelievable chef, and what he's done for the industry. You're very, very fortunate to have had time with Larry. So what excites you about your career these days?

Christina: What excites me? God, what doesn't excite me? So here's what's really fun about the direction that my career has taken. I went from being a chef in a restaurant, you know, working for Gordon Ramsay, and then I had the privilege of opening up Buchon in Beverly Hills, and seeing what it's like to open a twenty five million dollar restaurant was pretty cool, but now I'm exploring it other avenues, you know? So aside from working a line in a restaurant every single day, I'm out here in Napa Valley and I'm working with food and wine, working with small wineries, working with individual clients, preparing lunches and dinners. I'm taking on side projects, I'm doing some consulting in hospitality management,

and so what excites me about my career today is I never know what's coming up tomorrow. The environment is constantly changing and I'm able to use a diversified skill set and so I'm not just doing the same dish day in, day out—lunch service, dinner service—everything is exciting and everything is new and I'm very privileged to be at this stage of my career.

Ron: And you've also started to, or maybe not started, but you also have become educated pretty deeply in wines.

Christina: Yes, so my parents drank a lot, Ron, growing up, and that's where it started. So my parents, my parents, drank a lot of wine, and there was always wine around. And I'm from St. Louis, Missouri—for a while, we had a little farm in Augusta, which was the first American viticultural area back in 1980, and so wine has always been a part of my life. I traveled to Italy in my freshman year in high school with my Latin club. You know you can have wine there. And so now, as my food career progressed, I actually—you don't know this story—I had an epiphany one day.

I'm in Beverly Hills and I'm working at Buchon, and I'm a poissonnier cooking fish and so, you know what my life looks like—I get to work at nine in the morning and I butcher fish, I cook lunch service, maybe I get a siesta in the afternoon, I cook dinner service, I'm walking to my car, I'm tired, I stink, and I look over and I see our sweet little sommelier, Craig, in his little suit. He worked six hours that day and he's walking to his BMW carrying a case of wine, and I said, I need to do what you do! And so I was able to take some classes in wine with the court of master sommeliers and became a level two flight sommelier in Los Angeles. But in order to progress that I had to move up here where grapes were grown, and you know, the two go hand in hand. Now I don't know as much as a sommelier, and I'm not the best chef, but I get to do both and that's pretty darn cool.

Ron: And it's really obvious, your passion and your love for, you know, the craft of cooking and the enjoyment of wine. What is a level two sommelier, and how many levels are there, and what do you do to get there?

Christina: Well, according to my grandmother, level two sommelier is a professional wino, so—no—so the court of master sommeliers has changed quite a bit since I started working with them over a decade ago, and it takes a lot of studying. So introductory level, the hardest part for me about passing that was getting the five hundred dollars to take the test. It's a brief overview and it really sets you up for success down the line.

The certified level, it's three components, so there's a service which is an oral exam. There is a tasting component, so blind tasting where you're going to assess different components of the wine structurally: the color, the acid, whether there's oak, the different fruit nuances, how old, what vintage it is, what region it could come from based on the climate, and then ultimately you make an assessment of what it is. Is it sauvignon blanc from Napa Valley or New Zealand or Sancerre, and then there's also a written exam as well. And let me tell you, the service quotient is the hardest part, because standing there, looking a Master sommelier in the face as they ask you a question that you don't know the answer to is probably the scariest thing, and you have to pretend you're on stage in a restaurant and roll with it and go with it.

So the advanced level would be the level three. It's very similar to certified, except for ten times as difficult. And then the Master Sommelier. And if anybody's seen that movie *Somm*, you'll know, I

mean, we really are crazy people with maps of France above our bed. And I worked on a pasta station where I would roll out five fresh doughs before service. It would take me two hours and I had flash cards on my station, and as I'm rolling out pasta I'm, you know, naming off all of the different cities on this tiny river in France and it, I mean, it makes you crazy. But then you just drink wine so you could practice, and that brings you back to normalcy.

Ron: And enjoy.

Christina: Yes.

Ron: How much weight do you put on food trends? And what kind of food trends are you seeing?

Christina: Food trends, I think, are really interesting. I don't know if my career has been long enough to see a lot of trends, but I know back when I started cooking it was crusted halibut, musavi mashed potatoes, and then all of a sudden we go into molecular gastronomy, and after 9/11 you see a trend where everything's coming back to home. You start seeing meatloaf pop back on the menu, and it's like this comfort food. Then there's the slow food movement. I think one of the trends that I do pay attention to and that isn't going to go away is an awareness of seasonality and quality of product. People are educated now. There's documentaries and they're really reading into where is the product made, is it wholesome, what goes into raising a chicken, or what kind of water are you using to irrigate the lettuce field? And so I think that that's something that the consumer is going to be looking for. Not just at a restaurant, but on grocery shelves as well.

And I think you could see this trending, going towards wholesome foods and the way the products are created across the board. I mean whether it's McDonald's changing their menu to do fresh salads, or in the grocery store you see organic products are clearly listed, and so I think that this is a trend that's not going away. People care about what they're eating and they're looking for diversity. We no longer have pot roast every Sunday night. We're looking for different things, and so you see that not only with the new companies, with meal delivery that are coming and teaching you how to cook new things, delivering fresh-frozen. It's something that I'm proud of being a food trend, and definitely will be around for a while.

Ron: I really love hearing that. So one of the things that I love to talk about with chefs, especially chefs like you and I that, you know, we have worked, and do work at a very fresh level, and scratch cooking and stuff. So how does what we do get out to everybody? Because a lot of what we do is for us, you know, there's expensive restaurants and things, so how does that make it through the mainstream? Does it take time? How do we get there? Do you see that going through the mainstream?

Christina: Well, so, Ron, one of the unfortunate circumstances about working in a high end restaurant is you don't make a lot of money. So, you know, I'm preparing these great, artful dishes with tweezers at work, and then I go home and I have to make the dollar stretch, right? So I put a lot of thought into the food that I put on the table and try to use 100% of the product. So if you look into my freezer Ron, it probably looks like junk to most people, but to a chef it's gold. So if I'm able to have shrimp, I'm saving the shrimp shells and I'm making a stock. When I have chicken, you know, sometimes I'm lazy, I buy that rotisserie chicken at the store and I save the bones and I make stock out of it. And I saved my vegetable

trim and I make soups and I actually feel proud as a chef that I'm able to take something that, you know, other people might throw away, and make something that's incredible and delicious.

Ron: That's really great. That's fantastic. Christina, thank you very much. This was really, really great talking to you. It's been a pleasure meeting you. Thanks for the photo to throw on Instagram—it's already out there. It has been a lot of fun talking with you and getting your insights.

Christina: Thank you, Ron. It's been so much fun to catch up, and hopefully you tag me on that photo on Instagram!

Ron: Well, I don't really know how to tag people, but I'm sure if I go back I can figure this out. So thank you very much.

Ethan: Thank you for joining us on this episode of Our Food Journey™. For more information on Hormel Foods and our engagement with our customers and partners, please visit hormelfoods.com