

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 5 - Making the Angels Sing

Dominic Orsini: On a regular basis, you'll hear people say, “Don’t forget to put Justin in the walk in before you go home! Don’t forget to feed Justin today!” He’s a living entity in our kitchen.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. On today's episode, Master Chef Ron DeSantis talks with Dominic Orsini, the executive chef of the Silver Oak Winery in Napa Valley. Dominic is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and he’s a level one sommelier. Dominic is obsessed with ways a chef can connect a meal and a glass of wine with a sense of place. He strives to produce culinary experiences that, as he puts it, make the angels sing. Please enjoy this conversation with chef Dominic Orsini.

Ron DeSantis: Hello, I am certified Master Chef Ron DeSantis and we're here at the Culinary Institute of America, Graystone—interesting, there are lots of swallows right outside the window, building their nests—and I am really excited because I’m here with Dominic Orsini, Executive Chef of Silver Oak. Dominic, welcome.

Dominic: It’s really good to be here.

Ron: So just to start off, how did you decide to become a chef? What happened?

Dominic: Ahh, becoming Chef. So growing up in the suburbs of Philadelphia I spent many a summer working at restaurants here and there. I started at your fast food restaurant like a lot of young Americans might, but eventually I had worked in some Italian restaurants doing dishwashing, and when it came to my junior year in high school I was trying to think to myself, what am I going to do with my life? I don't really want to go to college—it's not my thing, and I thought to myself, you know, I’ve always cooked at restaurants, and so I went to my mom. I said, mom, would “chef” make a good career? Is that a good career choice for me? And she was like, oh my God yes and you have to go to the Culinary Institute of America and it was this—

Ron: Sounds like a smart mom.

Dominic: —almost this pre-thought plan out for me. Yeah, well I immediately learned that to get in the CIA you have to have at least like a year experience at a restaurant. This is back in 1992, so I immediately left the cheaper restaurants and got a job as just a simple line cook at a little French bistro called The General Warren and uh you know, cut myself, burned myself, worked long hours and said to myself, I love it and off to culinary school I went.

Ron: Go back to your influences, or memories that you have of food that influenced you today.

Dominic: So my earliest memory of food was at my grandparents’ house. My Pennsylvania Dutch grandmother was married to an Italian-American, my grandfather, and she spent a lot of her life proving

to her sister-in-law that she could cook as good as they could. And so they had their own gardens at the house and some of my earliest childhood memories were, you know, working in the garden with them, harvesting tomatoes, harvesting zucchini, corn, watermelon. I mean, you name it. They were growing everything, and it was that phase of my life that I was introduced to fruits and vegetables—fresh—and it was kind of funny, as you get older, you know, people move away and things move on and there was a period that I forgot about it. There really was. I went off to culinary school. While I was at culinary school, I started remembering all these childhood memories of these fresh vegetables and things that were there, and it just came flooding back to me over the years, and it's made me committed to wanting to cook from gardens and my own gardens.

Ron: So you did that and you went to culinary school. So after that where did you... Tell us a little bit about where your journey took you.

Dominic: While I was at culinary school there was a wine class that the school teaches all the students. And so while there, I learned about Napa Valley and Sonoma County and how it was on the international stage of wine. At the time I was twenty years old, I didn't really know a lot about wine. My family did drink some wine, but we were those everyday kind of cheap, you know, like you're talking about a jug wine, drinking family. And just learning about how Napa was on this international stage of wine made me say to myself, I bet that would be a good place for a chef's career to be.

Ron: So you've been out here since, like, ninety five?

Dominic: Yeah, ninety six actually. First I started in Healdsburg and I worked for a small brewery. So I ended up meeting a gentleman called Guy Fieri, and this is way before his Food Network days, and I opened some restaurants with him from ninety six to... I worked with him until 2000, over in Santa Rosa. And then in 2000, I'm like, I want to get back into fine dining and focus on wine, so my journey's brought me over here to Napa Valley. Ironically I ended up getting a job here at the CIA. Yeah, in the restaurant, the Wine Spectator Greystone in 2001, and that was my falling in love with that.

Ron: So here you are, you're Executive Chef of Silver Oaks and one of the most beautiful wineries. It's really, really beautiful there.

Dominic: Legendary, as well.

Ron: Yeah, and where do you draw your inspiration?

Dominic: Um, inspiration. So, you know, inspiration for me is... I like to stay contemporary with cuisines, so I'm definitely getting inspired by, you know, what customers are seeing, what we're seeing in restaurants, a little bit more modern. But my inspiration truly comes from the seasons. I like to cook with what's available. Exclusively from our gardens, if possible.

So at the winery we have about five of our wines that we do four and five course meals with, so my inspiration mainly comes from what's available from the gardens, what's in season, what's here. And then also the mood of our guests, you know, what's the weather like outside? Is it a warm day? Or is it a cold and chilly day? Taking those considerations first, and then from there, the wine actually comes last

in that process. I cook what I want to cook, and then I figure out how to season my food to balance it to the wine. And the wine kind of, you know, comes later.

Ron: Crazy question: Can you take some grapes, go out, cut a cluster of grapes and do something with them in the food? Or is it something you wouldn't do, couldn't do? Or is it just too crazy?

Dominic: Well, yes and no. So when I started at the winery in 2008, there was this vineyard sitting on the property. It was this twenty year old cabernet vineyard, and I had heard that at the end of that harvest they were going to rip the vineyard out and replant it. And I had just started at this winery and I was thinking of the history that this brand had and I felt as though, you know, our founding winemaker walked these vineyards once and I want to preserve it. So at harvest I ran out there and harvested a couple bunches of grapes and I put them into a mixture of flour and water, and what happened was the wild yeasts on the skins of the grapes started to eat the sugars and the juice of the grapes, they started eating the sugars in the flour, and then I continued to feed it some more flour and water over a few day period and it turned into what you're probably very familiar with—a bread leavin, or a wild yeast starter.

Eventually we pulled out the grape stems and skins, and after several feedings it went from that red color to more of a bread dough color, if you will. But it's this wild yeast starter that we preserve and maintain and we use that to make our breads to this day.

Ron: To this day.

Dominic: It's nine years old now. Actually it will be ten years old in September, or actually October to be exact. We named the starter after founding winemaker Justin. Justin Meyer was the founding winemaker and so on a regular basis, you'll hear people say, "Don't forget to put Justin in the walk in before you go home! Don't forget to feed Justin today!" He's a living entity in our kitchen. And this bread starter is just something that we love and care for on a regular basis.

So with it, I'll take it out in the morning and will feed it once a week. We're able to maintain in the refrigerator. And then we want to bake bread, we take a little bit out, mix it with some flour and water. It sits out for about eight hours. After that eight hours we then make the bread and then we let that bread ferment in our cellar overnight. And then the next day we bake the bread. So that's one of the few ways I figured out how to use the grapes on the property, you know, it's much better. The grapes are great to leave for the winemaking, but there's also some fun things you can do with them as well.

Ron: That is a great story. I mean that is really, really a great story. So, you know, here comes harvest time and grapes are coming in. Do you ever have any opportunity to get kind of involved with, I don't know, squeezing, crushing, going to... I don't know, whatever happens on there.

Dominic: I hear you, yeah I hear you. I'm in there with my feet, just crushing the grapes all the time. That toe jam... No, I'm joking of course. You know the wine making, it is such an art to what they do and their abilities to bring in these grapes from the vineyard within an hour and then crush it all and go through the process of sorting it, crushing it, pulling the grapes from the stems, fermenting. I let them handle that magic because it's an amazing process, and also that's a time of year when a lot of people want to visit the winery and they want to have lunches and dinners, so we usually stay pretty busy with the private events that we'll do. The winemaking team is great.

There's always a little bit of byproduct from the wine making process. There is wine that is used to top off barrels and to top off tanks, and sometimes it's a little bit more than they need so, they let me have that from time to time. We've done things like taking some lees and will braise meats in some pinot noir or some cabernet lees. Sometimes we'll take this top-off wine and I'll get to make my own vinegar. That's a touchy one. I gotta get that one completely away from the winery to do it, but we'll put in a ferment and we'll make our own vinegar with that.

One of the fun things I started about seven years ago was a balsamic making project, and we have about two rows of table grapes on the property, and long story short, I went through this process of taking all those grapes, juicing them, and you cook them down to like a syrup. So you take approximately forty, fifty gallons of this grape juice and then slowly cook it down to about fifteen to twenty gallons. Now at this point it's like this thick syrup. Now you have to ferment it, so there's this special thing they use called zygosaccharomyces, and it's a type of bacteria that ferments that concentrated sugar into, essentially, a wine. And then from that point, you go and mix it with a little bit of red wine vinegar. So you have this sweet wine and red wine vinegar, and then you put it into a barrel. And then it goes to an even longer process that slowly turns the whole thing into vinegar. But a sweet vinegar.

We started that process about seven years ago. I started with a large American oak barrel. Each year I've taken that batch and and barreled it down to a smaller barrel. I've gotten down now to a three gallon barrel, and in that three gallon barrel we've had three harvests from that barrel so far. We just harvested our balsamic about last week, and I started getting some used bourbon barrels in as well, to add some complexity to that. So we're making our own balsamic. Now, true balsamic, they say, takes twenty five years. It's something you're making for your grandchildren? Really, I guess you could say? But it's something we started and something we have fun and some passion doing and making every year.

Ron: That's exciting. As you were talking I didn't want to interrupt you, but I realized when you said I'm gonna make some vinegar, but I gotta do it away from the kitchen, you imagine these huge vats turning into vinegar—

Dominic: Yeah, right?

Ron: —the chef did it!

Dominic: Yeah, I learned that quite quickly with copied emails: Dominic, you will not bring that on the property. You got it. I love it here, I am not going to bring that on the property.

Ron: So talk to us about the wine experience being tied to its sense of place.

Dominic: Establishing a sense of place is something that can really go hand in hand with, not only what we do at the winery in making the wine, but what all of Napa wineries are trying to do. The Napa Valley here is such a beautiful region, but it's a diverse region with different soils from different areas. You have the soils in the hillsides bringing in hillside fruit, producing a very pure fruit character to wine, then you have wineries producing wine from that from valley floor fruit. A little bit more of a silky tannin, kind of a bold characteristic you find in wine, and so the wineries themselves already have identified a lot of those senses of place, and to do that in the food I really wanted the bread starter to be a part of that, but taking it a step further, our gardens—we grow our own tomatoes, we'll do our own san marzano tomatoes

and make our own tomato sauce. We'll have vintage tomato sauce. Usually use it up within a year, but I don't like to use previous vintage sauce, but we'll jar our own tomatoes in September and October so we have our own oat field tomatoes we use for our pizzas, and we do a lot of wood oven pizzas and fun things like that and, you know, providing that unique sense of experience for our guests, to me, that goes a long way with making the angels sing when you're doing a wine pairing.

Ron: What does that mean?

Dominic: Making the angels sing? What that means... So as a chef my job is to create cuisine that really highlights our wines, really makes our wine sing, and no matter what flavors and seasonings I can add to food, I can create it and make the wine taste really good. But that situation in which angels are singing, those are those experiences many of us may have had, whether it's with a glass of wine, whether it's with a beer, whether it's with another beverage or not even a beverage but an experience. Those times in which that moment crystallizes in your mind, you recognize where you're at, what's happening, and it's a memory that stays with you forever.

Like when you read, you know, an example of a wine writer, they talk about the time they were off the coast of Brittany and having oysters and a glass of, you know, muscat, and was it that oyster and that wine? Or was it the fact that they're in France on this special vacation. They're a little intoxicated and all these things, so being able to provide some of those elements of romance in addition to really good cuisine and great wine, and then hospitality altogether. And when all those things can dance well together, that's what creates those times of angels singing in your mind.

Ron: That's great, that's great. Is there any dish, any simple dish that you cook at home? Not in the professional vein?

Dominic: Well, I have two boys at home. I have a ten year old and a seven year old and a busy working wife. So cooking at home tends to be a little bit of a hurry up, get it on the table, get your homework done, get to bed. But with that said, we just remodeled the kitchen in my house last year—my old kitchen was horrible—and so I got to design this whole kitchen. I was so excited and it's up and going now, and I was able to convert this kitchen at my house just like, wow, I really love cooking at home again and so this kitchen space I have now, I'm always doing something different. The president at Silver Oak always likes to say how I've been cooking for him for ten years and never once have I repeated a dish. I'll admit, I'm kind of guilty of that. I'm always doing something fun, something different, and I'm always taking new inspiration to get something cooking. To nail it down to one? That's too hard for me.

Ron: From chef to chef, I understand, believe me, I understand one hundred percent. I was just telling somebody, I keep getting asked, what's your favorite thing to cook? And I always think I should, like, just make something up because everybody asks that question and my answer is, it depends.

Dominic: Yeah, yep.

Ron: It depends on who's coming, what time of day it is, who's around, I mean there's all these variables that could come into play.

Dominic: Well my wife will tell you her favorite meal by me is refrigerator surprise. She's home and she's like, there's nothing for dinner, what are we going to do? What are you talking about? Honey, we got this, this, this, this, this, and I've come up with dishes where I'm like, I'm gonna put that on my menu. That was really awesome. So yeah, some of my best creations have come from that.

Ron: That's great, that's great.

Dominic: Common question I get as a chef: what do you cook at home? When I cook at home I source ingredients that I know are pure and wholesome, and quality ingredients and not just the basics. I will buy some pre-made frozen things that are a convenience for me and I love them. One is the frozen jasmine rice. You look at the ingredients, what is it? Jasmine rice. That's it, and it's IQF. And I can pull it out, I can microwave it and it's on the table within a couple of minutes. I love it.

Another one. This is a recent one. And ironically—this is not a plug—it's the Hormel bacon bits. They're sealed in a packet. I love them, they're pre cooked, I can open them up, I can just toss them into a vegetable saute, and I got bacon flavor and it's excellent. Things like that. As a busy person trying to feed my family healthily, I want ingredients that, one, I recognize everything that's there. I understand that the convenience is there, and I'm not worried about what am I feeding my family, and so that's one of the biggest things that I focus on.

Ron: Those kinds of tips are just so valuable for people in your position and my position, because people can look at chefs like you and me and it's like, well, you know, they do this, and yes, professionally we are, but you're right. There are a number of very good quality convenience products that can help us out, that can streamline things for us, and if they're there, why not?

Dominic: This is important for me. Whenever I look at the packaged food I am on the back, and I'm reading that ingredient list, the fine print. I want to know what's in there.

Ron: Chef, thank you very, very much for being here. A great conversation. Everybody, thanks for listening to Our Food Journey™, here with Executive Chef Dominic Orsini. To learn more, hormelfoods.com. Until next time.