

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 7 - The Future of Culinary Education

Adam Busby: For some reason, people enjoy watching shows where other people fail, rather than succeed. They enjoy watching people fall like dominoes in a kitchen, and this is the opposite of the way real kitchens work.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. I'm Ethan Waters. Each episode we speak with people making a difference in our food system. If you want to get a sense of modern food trends, visiting the Culinary Institute of America is a great place to start. Students at the CIA learn more than just how to make a great meal and run a professional kitchen. They study the big picture as well—issues like sustainability, health and food equity. It is not an overstatement to say that the CIA trains the future leaders in our food system. Today, I'll be speaking with Adam Busby, certified master chef and the general manager of the Napa Valley campus of the CIA.

After nearly thirty years in the food business, he's devoted himself to training the next generation of chefs and food entrepreneurs. He knows that the young chefs he's training will, as a group, face many difficult challenges during their careers, but he is encouraged by their spirit of innovation and their understanding that a healthy food system is critical to a happy and productive society. I hope you enjoy this conversation with Adam Busby. Adam, thanks for joining us.

Adam: Thanks for having me.

Ethan: I've been learning that every chef has their own unique pathway through their career. They're really diverse in terms of travel and education. Tell us a little bit about how you got to where you are.

Adam: I grew up in a food family, surrounded by great foods all the time. We cherished the times we spent together, eating together, and my parents, at a pretty young age, they started taking me to nice restaurants. Both my parents really liked good restaurants, so we would go out often and I was just exposed to a lot of food, a lot of good food at a young age, and I took a, I guess it was serendipitous, but I took a summer job in a restaurant at college doing dishes, and as many college students do, and the line cook was out one night, sick. It was kind of a last minute thing and the chef turned to me and said, you could do this. I need you to come do this. So long story short, I got thrown on this line of this really busy steakhouse for a night, and at the end of the night he's like you have to go to cooking school. You're, like, a natural. I said, really? You know, I'm in university, I'm studying math, and he's like no, no, no. You're good with your hands. You gotta cook.

So anyway, long story short, I ended up going to cooking school for a couple of years and then working in a small French restaurant, fine dining, and I thought I kind of knew what I was doing. So I sold everything and I bought a one way ticket, moved to France, had two chef coats, my chef knives, a Michelin guide and I bought a Eurail pass. And I traveled around France, visiting two and three Michelin star restaurants until I found a job, which was no easy feat. Took a couple months to do that. But when I did, it really paid off and I spent a couple of years in France learning from some of the great chefs of the day. That was back in the late eighties, early nineties. So that's how I got my start, really.

Ethan: So go back to your food family. They took you to fine restaurants. Was that food served in your house? Were your parents good cooks as well? And what was the cuisine that they would...

Adam: Yeah, so I mean two fairly diametrically opposed cuisines. British and Danish. The Brits aren't known for their food. The Danes, however, well, Danish food is pretty hot these days, but when I was growing up, it was just really honest food. A lot of fish, a lot of cured fish, things that my mom would make herself. Pickles... My mom grew up in the war, so she knew how to make the most of everything and use everything, so as a result the food was wholesome. It was honest, it was cooked with love, and it was enjoyed by everybody. I don't remember a bad meal, really.

Ethan: For some that grew up in the war, in a time of rationing or in a time when things weren't available, it shapes your palate and shapes your desire to make the most of food. A lot of this generation growing up in America, we have access to enormous amounts of calories. It's a different thing. I wonder if we've lost something.

Adam: It's a different metric for sure. I'll never forget my mother telling me, and she grew up on a farm, we'd roast a chicken, we'd eat the chicken, and then would pick any meat left over the next day for salad, and then the third day it would be soup. The fourth day we'd dry the bones and oven, and on the fifth day we'd burn the bones for fuel. I mean, one hundred percent utilization.

Ethan: But hopefully, you know, those influences have not been forgotten. We're going back to a time when food waste seems to be an important, at least conversation. Do you see trends in actual ways where thinking about food and using food might change the metric in terms of the food waste in America?

Adam: There's a push towards plant-forward dining and people sort of, re-imagining their plate. It's going to change things a little bit in the coming couple decades, and there's a lot of drivers behind that. The main one being health and wellness, and people are starting to realize that hey, I gotta do something about this if I want to be around for a while and if I want to have a decent quality of life. So at the CIA, for example, we've put a lot of time and energy into learning from the clinicians and talking and looking at solid scientific data and interpreting that into, what are the next food trends and how's that going to shape the American diner? And plant-forward, that's the big one right now.

Ethan: And also, a sort of corollary to that, the functional foods, the idea that you're eating—and certainly this has changed the drink industry remarkably—this idea that you're drinking things for a specific function. It's for brain health or gut health or alertness. That, certainly in the last ten years, you see that in the beverage industry hugely, is that going to roll over into the food industry? Is it going to go into other meals as well? Are we going to be eating for specific functions, or health forward only?

Adam: Yeah, I think it's a bit of both, for sure. There's always going to be that industry that caters to people that believe by consuming one thing or another that's going to play into their health and wellness. Take vitamins, for example, supplements, a huge industry as we all know, but then when it comes down to food on the plate, the big challenges, the value proposition in America that we see a plate of food as a protein surrounded by a bunch of stuff, and when we go into a restaurant we expect that protein to be

there and and to be in the size that we recognize, which is usually about eight ounces, it's too much. We know that. So if the food industry is going to shift, it usually shifts, by and large, by the big players. So how do you get some of those big players, those big chain companies to shift to a more plant-forward plate but still come across with the value proposition to the customer that they're still getting bang for the buck? That's the big challenge, right? So how do you do that? And that's, I think what a lot of operators are grappling with right now.

Ethan: What's the average age of a student at the Culinary Institute of America?

Adam: About twenty years old.

Ethan: Twenty years old. So you've got a young generation. I'm curious what you see in terms of their interests, in what they want to do with their career. I mean, I'm sure some of them classically want to be a great chef at a well known restaurant, but are there other trends or interests or ways they're thinking about their careers, that is maybe different than five years ago or ten years ago?

Adam: That's a great question. Getting a culinary education, or a baking pastry education, it's the key that unlock a whole bunch of doors these days. Maybe those opportunities used to exist, but I think now more than ever people are pursuing them, so if you were to poll the average class that's here at the CIA, you say, what do you guys want to do? Raise your hands if you want to open a restaurant in your future, if that's your plan. Used to be, I would say a decade ago, pretty much everyone put their hand up. Now I would say less than half the class will put their hand up.

They want to do all sorts of stuff. They want to write about food, they want to blog about food, they want to photograph food, they want to be on a film set, designing food, shaping food. They want to cook food, they want to open a food company, they want to start a sports nutrition bar company, they want to work on a cruise ship. There's so many different options that are available these days and they're all viable options if you've got a background in food, so it's definitely changed. It's changed what students come here for. Not everybody wants to work in a kitchen that comes here. Many of them just want to be a food and beverage manager, don't really want to work in a kitchen. That's fine, but you still have to know what you're doing in the back of house.

Ethan: It seems to be an incredibly exciting time to be in the food industry. I went to the fancy food show just a couple of weeks ago in San Francisco and walked onto the convention floor and saw just an amazing amount of innovation, and it honestly made me excited, feel little patriotic, a little bit like this is America's certainly back in the game in terms of if you go back to beer creation in the way that the craft brewing, you know, a generation ago, we're the world's laughing stock and when it came to beer, and then all these craft brews came along, not only re-inspiring America's interest in beer, but also helping their local economies. Chico and Portland, Boston would all have their own beers. I think I see that in the food industry as well, this tremendous upsurge from small companies and even to larger companies where people are being really thoughtful and innovative about foods.

Adam: A ton of innovation, a ton of innovation. And you're absolutely right, you go to those food shows, you get totally inspired, you start wondering about what you could possibly start.

Ethan: Absolutely. I'm wondering if any of your students think if they're—I'm sure they are, being the younger generation, interested in ideas like sustainability and food equity, food deserts—I wonder if anyone could start out with the idea like, I might be able to make a bigger impact if I go towards a bigger company. I could make a smaller change at a bigger company, like Hormel, you've had graduates go to Hormel, just to have that impact on the larger scale. Do they think about that early on, or is that something that they come to later?

Adam: We're talking about exactly what you mentioned, and that is that, hey, maybe doing an externship at a large company and learning about and assisting with some of today's challenges and opportunities is just as viable as going and spending fifteen weeks learning in a kitchen somewhere. So I definitely see that on the event horizon as something that the CIA will probably end up doing. It just makes a whole lot of sense for a whole bunch of reasons.

Ethan: Could you talk a little bit about mentorship and the importance of it within the food community and then the chef community? We have this idea from watching TV shows that a great chef has to be just terrible to people, who throws tantrums all the time and is really hard on people underneath him, and I'm thinking that might not always be true. Maybe that's just a TV story we hear.

Adam: In my career, which now spans some thirty five years, I've spent the majority of my time mentoring other people, helping other people cook better. And that was right back to when you're starting cooking. You're working next to somebody, you're helping each other out, you're always helping each other out. Making sure you're ready for service, making sure things are done correctly or better than they were yesterday. That's been my experience for thirty five years. For some reason, which I can't explain, people enjoy watching shows where other people fail, rather than succeed. They enjoy watching people fall like dominoes in a kitchen and one person "wins," so to speak, and this is the opposite of the way real kitchens work.

The food service, hospitality business is all about mentoring and bringing people along and achieving new heights and that's the reality of the industry and it's not necessarily portrayed that way in the media or on TV.

Ethan: In thinking about the food-beverage hospitality business, it does seem like it's one of those places in America, still, where you can work your way up, you can start at a very low level, and it's a path towards a good income eventually, but there's still, that sort of, pull yourself up by the bootstraps thing. Is that a correct impression?

Adam: Absolutely. One hundred percent. The ladder can be shortened somewhat by going to culinary school. Let's put it that way. The CIA, for example, we're moving more and more of our programs toward degree, and taking the student education to the next level with the idea that when you enter the industry that's going to give you a leg up, and that's going to make the process up the ladder to wherever that final rung is—and it's different for everyone—it'll make that path perhaps a little bit easier for people if they take the time to invest in a solid education.

Socioeconomically, you have people who started out as a dishwasher like me and kind of work their way up through the different levels. Depending on how far you want to go, it can be a long ladder

and it can take a lot of time. Just as long's it could take to be a lawyer or a doctor or dentist. This is a long time. It's like ten years before you're running a kitchen. It can take a while, but there's a space for everyone, I think, in all the different rungs on the ladder. For those who do aspire for more, the sky's the limit. Really, you can go as far as you want. You want to be on TV? You could be on TV. You want to own twenty restaurants and make millions of dollars? You could do that. You want to travel with food? Tourism? You can do that. You can really make what you want of it. It's pretty interesting in that respect. It's portable, you can take it anywhere, and you can go as far as you want.

Ethan: Yeah, in hearing the stories of master chefs and other chef's backgrounds, it always has to do with, you know, then I went to France for two years, and then I worked in South Africa, and worked on a cruise ship, and then I was at a resort. The navy always used to try to get recruits by saying, you'll see the world, but it seems like becoming a great chef almost promises the same thing. You end up in this strata of people where you know of an opening somewhere and you move and you move and you move and you move up.

Adam: It's interesting that you say that. The culinary world is fairly stratified, and you move horizontally within. So for example, if you are working in a Michelin starred restaurant, you tend to get passed around or traded or given opportunities within Michelin star restaurants because those chefs all know each other. And people move laterally and gain knowledge at the different places that they're at before they move to the next level. And it's not just in Michelin star levels, but in all the different levels there are sort of lateral movements within each strata, where people are gaining knowledge at that level, whether it be on a cruise ship or in a Michelin starred restaurant or in a fast casual restaurant chain.

Ethan: All right, now going to start to ask you the ridiculous, impossible to answer questions. So you're looking at the food landscape, the interconnected food system. Everyone's worried about sustainability and food equity and so forth. Where do you see us going as a culture? Are you hopeful about being able to provide good food for an exponential number of people every generation? Where do you see the big problems and the big hopes?

Adam: I think the writing's on the wall, and has been for a considerable amount of time, that our current food practices are unsustainable. Monoculture is unsustainable. Just by and large, it's not sustainable the way we're headed right now, and the move towards more plant-based diets as we were talking earlier, is the leading edge of the movement, to move in a direction where we're eating more sustainably stewarding our planet more sustainably, and I don't see any way to avoid that. It's like moving to electric cars. We're still digging stuff up and burning it to get around. I mean, it ain't gonna happen for that much longer. It's just not going to. I can't see a future where we're eating the way we do today.

Ethan: So, you know, in the same way with fossil fuels, we're either past the tipping point or we're clearly on our way to making positive changes. Are we doing it fast enough? Is there agreement within the food world that we're going to move in positive directions? Or do you feel like we're behind the curve?

Adam: It's still the value propositions. We still want to drive pickup trucks and eat big steaks. It's not moving anywhere quickly. But I think, geographically, it's starting to change. There are certain parts of

the world, certain parts of America that are starting to come on board and starting to make change, positive change, and hopefully that will spread, that will grow, and slowly, over decades, things will change as we realize that it's the only logical path for us.

Ethan: All right, I'm gonna give you a chef challenge. You have twenty people, you need to cook a dinner for them for under seven dollars a person. How would you do that? What would you do?

Adam: I would build a plant forward menu. I would look to grains, to legumes, vegetables for texture, for color, for flavor, for diversity. I would use that as the basis of the dishes, and then I would probably use animal protein more as a garnish. As most of the world, by the way, does, rather than using that as the center of the plate, and build the meal out that way.

For whatever reason, we've stratified the menu. You've got your eye on today's menu persisting, you've got your salad section—soup and salad section—and you got your appetizer section, and then you've got your main course section, right? What we really need to do is get rid of those categories and say, here's the dish. It's a salad with some of the stuff that you really want on top, and in that way, sort of flip the model on its head and turn the dishes around. Instead of being in different categories, just kind of build a menu that's more balanced the way that sort of food system would be balanced if it was correctly balanced.

Ethan: There's this outer edge, you go to Silicon Valley and there's a lot of startups that are really pushing this outer edge of food. So anything at the outer edge of food innovation that you find interesting is worth talking about.

Adam: I think that out of all the invasion, a lot of it—let's, pick a number—let's say eighty percent of it is never going to stick, but there's some ideas, some little gems, that will come across that really, make a lot of sense, right? So a good example would be, farming horizontally doesn't really make a lot of sense if you could farm vertically, right? So some of the systems you can get now, the aeroponic systems where you have vertical cassettes that you put lettuce plugs in, and those go in racks and those racks are loaded vertically. So you're now growing food in a vertical column eight feet high in the space of a container truck that would normally take an acre of land to do. The food density you can get out of that as compared to the one acre, it just makes so much more sense, right? And you can bring that food to places that don't necessarily have the land to grow the food. So things like that, ideas like that, that's a really good idea. To me, that makes a ton of sense. Are we going to see that in the future? I sure hope so.

Ethan: Thank you so much for joining us here today.

Adam: You're very welcome.

Ethan: Thank you for listening to this conversation with Adam Busby. I'm Ethan Watters and I hope you'll join us again Our Food Journey™. For more information on Hormel Foods and our engagement with our customers and partners, please visit hormelfoods.com.