

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 8 - Would You Serve this to Your Mother?

Tony Finnestad: If this isn't something you would serve to your mom or the person you love the most in the world—your wife, your husband, your son or daughter—if you wouldn't do this for them, then you shouldn't be doing it.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. In each episode we talk to people who are making a difference in how we create and think about food. On today's episode Master Chef Ron DeSantis interviews chef Tony Finnestad who oversees culinary for Hormel Foods foodservice division. The conversation was recorded on a beautiful spring day on the campuses of the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley. Tony is a graduate of the CIA, and Ron a former teacher there. Chef Tony is a young man but already has a lifetime of experience in the food business. He's been the lead chef in fine restaurants and worked in product development before coming to Hormel.

Tony's career represents a trend for young chefs. He's decided he can make the biggest impact in the food business working for a large company where he could touch the lives of thousands of families. Part of Tony's job is tracking multiple trends in the food industry, including the public's shifting perception of big food and how supermarkets are increasingly becoming more like restaurants. We hope you enjoy this conversation with chef Tony Finnestad.

Ron DeSantis: Welcome to Our Food Journey™ broadcasting here from Hall Winery in Napa Valley, and with me is Hormel Executive Chef Tony Finnestad, CIA grad. Tony, welcome.

Tony: Thank you, thank you for having me.

Ron: So Tony, it's always fun to get to a place that's really about food and wine: Napa Valley. In some ways it's easier to talk about food and wine here, and inspiration and things like that. So just to start this off, tell us a little bit about what you do and what got you going in food.

Tony: This is the epicenter of food and wine in America. I mean, it's unreal and it's just beautiful. I am the corporate chef for the foodservice group at Hormel Foods, so what I do is I support our national accounts group, our chain account salespeople, as well as our college and university and healthcare segment specialists. So I basically travel around the country supporting our eight national accounts salespeople doing culinary demonstrations and presentations for our largest customers throughout the country.

Ron: It's a big deal.

Tony: Yeah, kind of. A little bit. I also do part of the research and development for our innovation items as well.

Ron: I said just a moment ago that you're a CIA grad, so what got you moving in the food direction?

Tony: That's a good question. I think it's something that a lot of chefs would tell you, you very often hear the story: I grew up cooking with my grandmother, my mom in the kitchen. I did not have that story. My mom would gladly tell you she's not a fantastic cook. She likes to cook, but I grew up in the restaurant industry and it's the only job I've ever had. I started washing dishes when I was fourteen and we got paid twenty dollars cash and all the free mozzarella sticks and free leftover banquet food you could get your hands on—which is great for a fourteen year old—and was a prep cook and a line cook at that same country club in my hometown, and then went to college.

I wanted to go to culinary school right out of high school, I grew up with a banker father and a teacher for a mom and they both said, nope you're going to go to real college, and so I went to real college, let's call it, for two years and worked in my first professional restaurant in St. Paul Minnesota called Red Fish Blue, and both the chefs there were CIA graduates, which led me to want to continue my education. I went to culinary school after my sophomore year.

The CIA was absolutely the best experience of my life. A good friend of mine was in every class with me for the two years that I was there, which is rare, as you know, chef, and we would walk to class and on a regular basis I would remind him, Joe, we go to school at the most beautiful campus in America. Now that's debatable, obviously, but right on the Hudson River upstate New York, fantastic experience, and since then my background has mostly been in fine dining, and up until a couple of years ago I was working in kitchens and lived in Miami and New York, Taos, Santa Fe, Jackson Hole, Austin, Dallas, Nashville, Traverse City, and now with Hormel Foods based in Minnesota.

Ron: And so you made a right back to Minnesota! It's not a bad thing. I love hearing those things, and you were able to get out and see a bunch of things and travel to different places and that's all really useful, especially for us, as chefs, because you get a broad exposure to things. Where do you draw inspiration from?

Tony: You know, that's a good question and it's something that continues... You know, every chef needs a spot for inspiration and I'm a big fan of Rick Bayless—there are a lot of chefs that I keep an eye on what they're doing, and Rick Bayless has a zero waste program at all his restaurants now, which I think is really fascinating and noble of him—but I draw inspiration from from all over the place. I try and keep a keen eye on what's going on in the industry. I travel at least three weeks out of the month, and so I try to keep a keen eye on what's going on in the industry while I'm traveling and what I'm seeing and what I'm tasting.

Ron: You just mentioned Rick Bayless, and I agree with you. He has done a great job as a chef to really introduce us and let us know what really great Mexican cuisine is about. His restaurants are fun, too. Really really a lot of fun. The food is fantastic. Who else do you look at or admire in the food business. Anybody else come to mind?

Tony: That's a good question. I think Mark Ladner is a chef that... He was at Del Posto in Manhattan and he just left to open a real fast casual—almost fast food—restaurant in New York and he's sourcing some of the best pasta in the world. It's handmade pasta and it is made for you and ready for you within just a couple of minutes and it's for seven eight dollars and it's fantastic, fantastic food. And I just think that, as a society, we're coming to a point, kind of a tipping point, where people are really demanding better food

and better quality and transparency with the sourcing and the ingredients and the pricing, and I think it's really noble and pretty brave of him to take them on like that and call it out.

Ron: What about trends? Do you put much weight on trends, or any kind of trends that you've noticed in the recent past?

Tony: You know, there's a difference between a fad and a trend. I think a lot of times trends tend to have a little more staying power, and if we're going to talk about cuisines, I think Indian is having a moment right now, or is at the very beginning of a moment. I think Ethiopian is about to have a moment, maybe in the next year, two or three years. Peruvian also. We're seeing some really interesting North African, so Lebanese or Tunisian, as well as Filipino. Filipino barbecue and barbecue in general. You used to just see regional barbecue, so Kansas City barbecues in Kansas City and Tennessee, you know, had their own, the Carolinas had their own varieties, but then you saw Kansas City barbecue in Seattle and Tennessee barbecue or Texas barbecue in New York, but now you're seeing global barbecue. So you're seeing Filipino barbecue and Korean barbecue all over the country. I had Filipino barbecue in Des Moines, Iowa a couple months ago. Who would've thought?

Ron: Yeah and those are, you know, it's kind of interesting because during the late eighties when I was teaching at the CIA, there was—obviously it was now a fad—was fusion. And I think that the idea of that, at the time, was a little advanced. Today with the information we have, and people understand and know more about global foods, that whole idea of bringing different ingredients and things together is changing. So you see those kinds of things, that coming together, and when you talk about barbecues like that, those are those kinds of comfort foods that people can relate to, and it almost feels like that as the platform, people willing to try other things. That's actually a really good way to look at innovation and trends. How they come together.

I want to tie this into your role, because people can look at Hormel as big food—and it is big food—and part of what I like to do is to remind people that big food is not bad food. Big food is ultimately people and that's important to realize, so when you look at it from your role and you talk to restaurateurs, chefs, food service directors, people, things like that—we talked about making choices—what kinds of things do you tell people when you're helping them sift through what food choice to make?

Tony: Yeah, that's a good question. A friend of mine is the Executive Chef at a very large university in the upper midwest, and at some point all chefs, if you have the perfect framework—the labor, the equipment, everything you needed to make authentic everything—it would be great to do it that way. He doesn't have the labour to do it that way, so Hormel provides him with a solution for those types of things. So Korean beef barbecue, Mediterranean chicken, instead of him making that themselves, we provide that solution for him and in that operation. Now with the addition of Applegate and the raw material sourcing that we have available to us, we're now able to give customers a choice. So if they want that other option, or they may stick with conventionally raised protein, but we now have the option to give them something else if they want a slightly different product.

Ron: You mentioned Applegate and at the same time, Hormel Natural Choice is something I've used for a long time. It's an absolutely clean label and part of the reason that I love using it is I learned about HPP: high pressure pasteurization. And when I learned about this I was like, why doesn't everybody use this

stuff? The fact that we can avoid preservatives and all kinds of things in there, and we're making this food incredibly safe for the consumer. I think that's another great choice that someone would have.

Hormel is an incredible company. Over one hundred twenty five years of making high quality food. Of course there is the iconic SPAM®. When people don't see it they're like, you know, I remember this stuff. I think it's time for a reintroduction of SPAM®, I really really do. Create that next generation of people looking for that food, that flavor of that... And, you know, it might be Hormel chili and some of those iconic brands, but I know that Hormel has this amazing portfolio.

Tony: It's interesting you bring that up. SPAM® and chili are the two things that everyone first associates Hormel with, and there are almost two dozen varieties of SPAM® that we sell all over the world. Fantastic product. But you're right, the food service group has a vast array of products that are solutions for customers of all skill levels from the mom and pop up to the large chain restaurants and everybody in between. Beef barbacoa, pork barbacoa, pork carnitas, chicken carnitas, a bacon one which is the first fully cooked bacon launched on the market.

Ron: And I know it's really good.

Tony: It's fantastic and, you know, all sorts of thickness is on that bacon, but fully cooked chicken breasts and fire-braised chicken thighs, fully-cooked pork loin, ribs—there's a pretty good chance that you have had in the past three four months, at any at any given restaurant, that you've had a Hormel foodservice product in one of your dishes.

Ron: Tony, you just you just threw out fire-braised as if, you know—

Tony: Willy-nilly!

Ron: I know that food! Talk about that a little bit.

Tony: Yeah, it's a very cool process. It's not just marketing speak. The fire braising processes is real. We send raw material through a tunnel—it's this huge tunnel that has fire on all sides—and it's braised. It gets some charring, a little bit of caramelization on the outside of the meat, and then it's cooked from there. It helps to give the product a more authentic feel for a back of the house operator, so it looks like it was made in their kitchen. It offers them a fully-cooked product with great flavor and texture and a really nice looking appearance, too. It's essentially a giant flame tunnel that the product goes through before it's cooked. It's really pretty cool.

Ron: I know that the food is delicious from there. It's really amazing. That whole food service line, you're right, it has a place for lots and lots of operations. The other part is this huge retail element to Hormel, and

I know the things that come to mind for me are Holy Guacamole, Justin's Nut Butter, Skippy Peanut Butter, MegaMex—

Tony: Columbus.

Ron: Columbus, and you just mentioned Applegate, right? These are just very very high quality foods that are available to the consumer through retail, and you take a look at that and the high quality that is available from Hormel is really... It's one of those companies you can look to for inspiration.

Tony: It really is.

Ron: So chef, the supermarket world is evolving as well and Hormel plays a significant role in that retail space as well, and we're hearing the term grocer-aunt taking place. Thoughts, insights, opinions about that?

Tony: We talked earlier about a trend versus a fad, and I think some of those meal kits that we saw gaining popularity a few years ago, you thought those were going to take over the world, right? And they've cooled considerably, and the grocery stores have picked up on that, so they're now starting to—in their deli area—starting to make those kits that people can grab at the grocery store, so when they get home from the grocery store they have a kit ready to go. They don't have to then start prepping, because I think a lot of times what happens is people go out to eat because they either don't have the groceries or they don't want to do the prep work, or both. And in this case you're kind of taking that out of it, in that you're giving them a meal to take home with them.

But a lot of grocery stores are capitalizing on the convenience factor and have some legitimate restaurants in their grocery stores, and not only the prepared food bar, but now a hot bar and a real restaurant in the grocery store also. And there's a space for that too. I think Hormel has realized that and has a newly-created group that will focus directly on that instead of the retail and the foodservice groups trying to decide who's going to call on that specific portion of the grocery store. There's a division that's been created to call on that.

Ron: It's interesting, you started as a restaurant chef and did some really great things and honed your craft, and then you transitioned to a corporate chef. With the restaurant chef you impacted those particular diners, now you're in a position where you impact people in a very different way. How's that feel? Have you thought about the difference in that? And what do you think about that kind of difference?

Tony: I don't know if I've ever really sat down and taken the time to dissect that, but what I can tell you is, as a chef, when I would teach young cooks, a lot of times there were two phrases I would use, and one was, where's the love? So when you're making a dish, it may be missing salt or some acid, you know, some sort of fat, and you'd say, where's the love? Where's the love in this? It doesn't taste like you put your whole heart into it, and believe it or not you can tell that, right chef?

Ron: You can.

Tony: You can definitely tell. And the other phrase was, talk to me. It's an industry phrase, but, talk to me. You know, would you serve this to your mom? And that has not changed. So that is something that I absolutely take and use in my day-to-day work here with Hormel. If this isn't something you would serve to your mom or the person you love the most in the world—your wife, your husband, your son or daughter—if you wouldn't do this for them, then you shouldn't be doing it. And that's something that we all do, and that's something that's translated from the restaurant world into my corporate chef world as well.

Ron: I love that. That's right on. And that's the thing, that's where I said big food is not necessarily bad food because it's made of people. And you're that people. Bringing that philosophy and that way of doing things in the restaurant world and that small batch into the corporate world, from a food point of view, that's a good thing and Hormel is a food company. So I think it's all working. You're all bringing it together.

Tony, I really appreciate the time. It was very insightful and fun to talk to you. Thank you very much for joining us on Our Food Journey™. If anyone wants to know more about it, hormelfoods.com. Broadcasting from Napa Valley. Until the next time, Ron DeSantis.