

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 9 - Cooking for Superstars

Kenneth Temple: That's my advice to young talent. Make mistakes. I think everybody just wants to be perfect, without knowing that your grandmother—before she created that famous dish that you love so much—your grandmother probably burned that thirty times, but you never got to taste that batch because your parents got to taste that batch.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. On today's episode Master Chef Ron DeSantis interviews chef Kenneth Temple. Chef Kenneth has deep roots in New Orleans and runs Savory LLC, a personal chef and private dining service. He's cooked for NFL and NBA players, celebrities, politicians, Grammy Award winning artists, and Hollywood movie producers. His company focuses on delicious food with creole, cajun, southern, and caribbean influences. It's something that Chef Kenneth calls Southern Creole. If you recognize his voice, it might be from his appearance on the Food Network's popular cooking competition show, Chopped. he was one of the show's winners during the 2017 season. We hope you enjoy this conversation with chef Kenneth Temple.

Ron DeSantis: This is certified Master Chef Ron DeSantis. I am here today with chef Kenneth Temple. Welcome Kenneth.

Kenneth: Thank you for having me.

Ron: Here's the thing. I've watched you on Hormel videos, so in one sense I kind of felt like, well, I know this guy, but just the past couple days chatting with you, you feel like an old friend.

Kenneth: Thank you, thank you. It's good for the Master Chef to call a young chef an old friend. I like that.

Ron: This is really good. We've had a chance to talk about food and I got to listen to some of your stories and things like that. To start us off, how'd you get involved in food?

Kenneth: You know, it was one of those things where you just have to make a life decision, graduating from high school, about what you're going to do with your life. So in 2003 the Iraq War was just starting to take, you know, the troops really getting on the ground and my father asked me, well if you're not ready to go to college maybe you could think about joining the Navy. Not really what I'm thinking about.

So one day one of the local colleges in Louisiana had a little table set up at school, and they had a culinary arts program. I had a cousin that was playing football down there so I knew I could easily see the campus. It was like, well cooking sounds fun, huh? I guess I'll go for cooking. It was either cooking or computers and I knew I didn't want to stand in front of a computer screen all day. But my first job was as a delivery driver at a local Italian Pizzeria.

Ron: Oh, you didn't make them, you delivered them.

Kenneth: I delivered them, yeah. Delivered them and then I actually end up working my way up to the line, to getting on the line, learning a thing or two about how to do the chef flipping, sauteing, and get those octopus arms, as I like to say. Chef you know what I'm saying, when the line's rolling and them tickets are not stopping and you got to have multiple directions with those arms and it just looks like octopus hands going everywhere, you know. So yeah, I just fell in love with it and was like okay, this is...

Ron: So you started off you started off with pizzas.

Kenneth: Yes.

Ron: I love that. A really soft spot in my heart are pizzas, and I absolutely love doing that. And you're from the south, you're from New Orleans?

Kenneth: Yes sir. Born and bred, as I like to say.

Ron: Okay, talk a little bit about the food then. I mean, everybody knows, when you talk about food, people talk about New York City, they talk about San Fran, LA, they talk about Chicago, they always talk about New Orleans.

Kenneth: It's great to be from a mecca of a city—of a food culture—like New Orleans. I always tell people, we're one of the original cuisines of American cuisine. I say there's French, there's Italian, but you have this French, Italian, German, African American, Native American, Greek, you know, just all these different cultures that—English—you have all these cultures that came together in one and created gumbo, so all of those different cultures just binding together created this melting pot of deliciousness, as I like to say. So it's just great being from an area with that kind of rich heritage, and a resource, you know. People fly to New Orleans just for a bowl of gumbo. It's just something I'm proud to be a part of, having that New Orleans heritage. And like I said, being *from* New Orleans, I'm not from greater New Orleans. No, I'm from the five-o-four as we like to say.

Ron: Oh, nice.

Kenneth: That's the area code of New Orleans, for y'all who don't know.

Ron: I told you yesterday, I'm coming down in two weeks and I need some tips. I definitely need some tips on this one.

Kenneth: I'm ready, I'm ready.

Ron: You mentioned gumbo, and are there other things? Is there like a childhood or a growing up memory of a particular food or foods? I mean, we all have one or two or the list may be big, but there's something that just jumps out at you?

Kenneth: It still resonates with me today. Being a chef, people think you always eating, like, lobster tail and filet mignon with steamed asparagus, but I'm actually, like I said, I'm a southern boy. So I eat chicken, stewed chicken. Stewed chicken, you know, give me some rice and gravy. Inexpensive, let it simmer, get nice and tender, rich gravy, serve it up with a biscuit, I'm happy. And it resonates to me as a chef. One of my favorite techniques is a breeze. You just put the aromatics and you put the stocks and put the wines, the herbs, season it up and just let it go. And then when you take it back out and take off the top, that scent just perfumes and you almost wanna bathe in it, like can I bottle this and spray it. And just tender meat, delicious, all in one pot type of style dish that you know that's just...

Ron: But you gotta tell me about shrimp and oysters man. The shrimp and oyster world down there is, well, it's got everything.

Kenneth: Yeah, I mean the shrimp and oyster world, but, you know, nothing like a good pot roast or some stewed chicken. You can get fancy, and look, you could take the juice from the chicken or that roast and throw it over your shrimp and now you got your surf-and-turf.

Yeah, you know there are various ways. I was cooking for some friends while I was out here in New York, and I made grillades and grits, and grillades, for those of you who don't know is, you cook it with the trinity, you cook a little tomato sauce, a little brown gravy, and you just let your beef—

Ron: Hold on, you said trinity, you can't just world-class that man, let people know.

Kenneth: Trinity, onion, celery, and bell pepper. The French, they have the mirepoix, which is onions, celery, and carrots, so our sweet flavor in the trinity is the bell peppers instead of the carrots, and you just cook it with a little bit of gravy, you dust it, like we was just talking about yesterday with the pork loin, right? You just take it, slice it, batter it and fry it just to keep it nice and tender, and then you cover it with this rich gravy and just let it roll. An hour-and-a-half later that beef then broke down on the pork and broke down and then you got this gravy, and my friends are like, man we got some shrimp, so I just threw the shrimp in there too. I said, now y'all got surf and turf. And that's the great thing about New Orleans food, you can eat it for breakfast, lunch, or dinner—or even a midnight snack if you come out from Bourbon St. drinking too late.

Ron: Oh man that is so cool. I loved hearing that. Somebody said that there's a story about peeling shrimp?

Kenneth: Yeah, peeling shrimp. I remember being like, four, five years old, my Godmother sat me down at her dinner table, was like, I'm gonna teach you how to peel shrimp. And literally she taught me how to peel the shrimp, so I've been peeling shrimp for eighteen, twenty years. Yeah I know a thing about peeling shrimp, and it's always fun to teach people how to peel shrimp when you see they're really not used to it, and you'd be like, just pinch the tail, rip off the legs, wrap it around and *pop*. It'd be like, oh yeah, it's really easy. I was teaching the young lady when we had an event this week, and she had it easy. It was already deveined and everything. She just had to take off the peel and keep it moving. She was like, I can't get the tail off. I was like, just pinch it. She was like, oh it's so easy. I've been peeling shrimp for quite some time.

Ron: So you're, right now, a private chef.

Kenneth: Yes.

Ron: What do you do? Tell us a little bit about what that means.

Kenneth: So being a private chef, I'm responsible for different clients' day-to-day meal preparation. So I work a lot with the professional athlete guys, so they're on dietary regimens, all restrictions, just to make sure they have the necessary nutritional value that they need to produce on the court. For corporations paying multi-million dollars, we expect to see you produce on the court.

So I take care of the menu creation, grocery shopping, cooking the food, washing the dishes, cleaning the kitchen, so it's like I bring the restaurant to them, and then it also keeps their privacy where they probably like it. Because, you know, if you make a good name for yourself, people go out, you're just trying to grab dinner and go home, but everybody's trying to reach out, take pictures, get autographs. Well this way, if you don't feel like doing that, you have me at your disposal. And I just enjoy the intimacy of cooking, so being a private chef, that's how I was able to partner with Hormel for the Cooking and Culture, and get along with his company and have some fun.

Ron: I said that I enjoyed your video with Cooking and Culture, and it was just so genuine, and watching this one I'm like, this guy, I hope I get to meet him sometime. And here we are. I really enjoyed that, you did a really good job with that. Stick a little bit with the Hormel theme and big food. I've been involved in a lot of projects over the years with Hormel and I never thought of them as big food, I just knew it was good food. With that in mind I realize that they are big food, but they care about employees, they care about what it is they're looking for, food that has flavor, things like that. So as a chef, what message do you want to get too big food?

Kenneth: People are starting to pay a little bit more attention to what they're actually putting in their bodies, and with a company like Hormel, they're responsible. They're looking for a way to mass produce it, still with the same ingredients and quality, and put it in a package that's reliable, sustainable, and resourceful to the people. And that's just a beautiful thing. When I first was doing the Cooking and Culture, people were like, the chili people? I was like the chili, the SPAM®, the bacon, the sausage people. But yeah, once you actually look past what you just grew up on, then you see they have all of these different brands. They got the Mexican brand, they got Skippy peanut butter like, I eat Skippy peanut butter like every day, but I didn't know it was Hormel, so when they did the Cooking and Culture, I was like, get outta here!

Ron: You know, Justin's Nut Butter, Holy Guacamole...

Kenneth: Yeah, Holy Guacamole. You know we did something with the USA Today guys where I took the La Victoria hot sauce and made a quick little mock barbecue sauce and I just added some garlic and

tequila to it, and this stuff that you can incorporate into your daily regimen. Like I said, with the grillades and grits, take a little bit of that hot sauce from La Victoria. Instead of using tomato sauce, use some of that La Victoria enchilada sauce. And now, instead of going creole, we go a little bit of Mexican, latin-style creole, and they're like, hey my friend! So that's the fun thing. They actually care about their cooking and they want you to enjoy the product and keep coming back.

Ron: You have to come up with menus and things to prepare for a variety of people. Where do you find these things? Is there some place you go for inspiration, for ideas?

Kenneth: Yeah, you know, being a chef, sometimes you have to pull from old resources, and then looking to figure out how you can just put a twist on it, right? I just had to cook for a vegan client. Last season when I was cooking for him, he was only eating meat and fish, no pork or beef, just to maintain, not to bulk up, but you know, trying to create vegan food is like, of course vegan is the wave now, as we would say, so just finding out how I can do—oh you like macaroni and cheese—how am I going to do a vegan mac and cheese. So I know we just find inspiration from good sources.

I like those guys at America's Test Kitchen because they'll run through a recipe thirty times before they release it. So if I'm looking for inspiration on a technique that I may be contemplating, I know I could go to some of their sources, because they're battle tested. But then still, like all chefs and like I tell people, recipe isn't law. You go there for inspiration and then you add your twist to it.

Sometimes you go out to eat and, oh, I never would have thought about it like that. Like we went out to dinner and I had a corn brulee. Now when you originally think about corn, I mean with the chef understanding, you know corn is naturally sweet, creme-brulee is naturally a desert, you understand it has milk substance in it so you can get the corn milk out of it and make a corn stock, okay. I get it, okay. So yeah, I'm just drawing inspiration. Sometimes just digging deep, pulling from oldie-but-goodies, as I like to say, but then also seeing what's going on in the world. Social media nowadays, you just scroll, and oh, that looks interesting, and go from there.

Ron: What kind of advice do you give to chefs that are trying to develop their talent? Can you develop talent or do you just have to be born with it?

Kenneth: My first kitchen job out of college was at a restaurant called Zia's. A little local chain that does good food, right? They're not taking corners, like, no you're going to prep this and then put it on the line, I don't care how many restaurants we have, each restaurant is responsible for their own production. One of their rules that they had for new talent was making mistakes. You never hear a restaurant saying, make a mistake, because you're messing with my food cost.

That's my advice to young talent. Make mistakes. You're supposed to burn that corn one time, trying to get it extracted, and with the cream, it's not supposed to always be perfect. That's how you're going to learn about temperature, about the different techniques that you can use to get that final creation you're looking for. I think everybody just wants to be perfect, without knowing that your grandmother—before she created that famous dish that you love so much—your grandmother probably burned that thirty times, but you never got to taste that batch because your parents got to taste that batch.

Ron: That's right.

Kenneth: By the time you was born as a grandchild, I got this, yeah baby, actually with no problems. So don't be afraid to make any mistakes. I tell people, especially chefs or young cooks, you're going to cut yourself. And they be like, why would you say that? I say it's like being the lifeguard and being mad that you get wet. It's going to happen. You're not intentionally going to just sacrifice your finger, but sometimes in the heat of the moment, you're not paying attention. I promise you next time, after you cut yourself, you're going to be like, let me focus, let me take some attention to this detail, but don't be scared to make mistakes.

Ron: One of the things you just said, it was was really important to me and I think it's insightful, is that you said that your grandmother made that dish but she may have burned it and stuff and didn't do it right, but your parents ate that, those mistakes, and then down the road it came... So part of it is valuing the repetition of mastering the craft. And that's what it is. That doing it again, and doing it again, and you're right, make mistakes but you got to also learn from those mistakes, don't keep doing those mistakes.

Kenneth: If that chocolate chip cookie recipe sucks every time, get another chocolate chip cookie recipe, just switch it over.

Ron: And again, repetition is the thing that does it because then it becomes a natural part of what you do. You don't think about doing it. First you gotta keep thinking, and then it becomes just a natural flow of what you feel. That's really great advice to people.

Kenneth: Like with grits in my family, since we're talking about corn, I said I can't make bad grits or my dad would take me out of his will. Because we ate grits every Saturday and Sunday morning, so if I don't know how to make grits, I'm going to be in trouble, because like you said, over the years since a child, I've been experiencing how to make grits.

Ron: Chef, tell us a little bit about the community work you do with young people.

Kenneth: Absolutely. So there's two organizations, and it's kind of like they're brothers and sister organisations. One is Son of a Saint organization, which helps young kids whose parents may have died to violence or may have been incarcerated for a long time. So my friend, his father played professional football but he died at a young age because his heart was too large, so his father died when he was very young. So his way of giving back was reaching back out to the youth in New Orleans who had fatherless homes, just to provide a community for them.

So sometimes I go over there, just cook dinner, sit down and talk with them—they may have another guest speaker—and just be another strong male presence for them, that they can look up to and relate to. And the other one is Pink House, where they mentor young teen girls from like twelve to seventeen or eighteen. Mentoring them, teaching them how to be a woman, how to carry yourself, how to have their professional edge about you, how to have that confidence.

Ron: It's good to give back. It really, really is. Especially people who have the right heart. I know you have the right heart and it is really great to hear things like that. Chef, just a young chef sitting in front of me here, where's your career leading you to?

Kenneth: Well, I'm getting married and in September, so—

Ron: Congratulations!

Kenneth: Thank you. Yeah, so my career is—without my planning—taking me to Dallas, Texas. So I'll go there, hopefully I hit the ground running. There's four major sports teams out there, so that's enough work to keep me busy year round with different clients. There are major Fortune 500 companies out there, so maybe some opportunity there, you never know. And my fiancée, she's a good blogger too, so I'll probably do some more cooking, cooking on camera. I really enjoy doing that, just let me cook and talk at the same time.

Ron: You're a natural on camera. I've watched you.

Kenneth: As we all know, you have plans in your career and then somehow opportunity comes along and it just takes you to a higher level. I wasn't planning on working with Hormel Foods, but the opportunity presented itself, and I got to do a fabulous thing and go visit the campus of Hormel out there in Austin, Minnesota and now here we are in New York City, having fun, talking about cooking and coaching and doing podcasts.

Ron: Along the way didn't you do something with Chopped?

Kenneth: Yes, I was on Food Network, Chopped. And won. Chopped champion.

Ron: Oh, congratulations!

Kenneth: Thank you, thank you. So I won that last year. We filmed it last May, almost a year to date, and it aired in November, November ninth. With that, I was working on my first cookbook, Southern Creole: Recipes From my New Orleans Kitchen, and I just released that too.

Ron: Chef, this has been a great conversation with you. Thank you so much for your time. This is certified Master Chef Ron DeSantis with chef Kenneth Temple, wrapping up Our Food Journey™, a podcast with Hormel. For more information, hormelfoods.com. Thank you for listening.