

Evan Kleiman LiveWell Interview, Re-Release

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Evan Kleiman



Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:00

Hi to our LiveWell community. Welcome back. What if I told you this we are stardust with microbiomes? We crave rituals that can very easily be found in Italy. And we are imperfect and messy. And that's all okay. Well, those are the elephants the conversation we had a year ago with renowned food writer and overall food icon, Evan Kleiman. Evan is full of wisdom, many of which you can hear on her podcast, KCRWs Good Food. As we approach Thanksgiving and the season of eating, I really wanted to reshare this episode with you. It's a soft and gentle reminder that how deeply human and delicious the ritual of Slow Food and regenerative eating is. So close up with a cup of chamomile tea and enjoy this episode.



01:01

Evan, it's such an honor to have you here and be on the other side asking you questions. You've done that once at least once with me at the Venice family clinic. And I'd like to just let all our listeners know that you are a Bruin double Bruin. Correct? That's true. And you have been involved at UCLA and variety of ways, running panels around food, of course, and then also teaching a class to undergraduates. And I think a few grads might have taken that course, in the summertime. And you've also been really supportive of our launching and imagining what are Rothman Family Institute for Food Studies here at UCLA would be and you were there at the opening? So why is it so exciting to you to work in the world of food?



Evan Kleiman 01:56

You know, I remember that when I first started doing good food, people were so surprised that one can have a serious conversation using food as a lens. A lot of people still think that what I do is talk about recipes. You know, I truly believe that so many of the world's ills relating to injustice and human health or degraded ecosystems could be solved by centering food and the food system as a way of making change, because it incorporates every part of human existence and bringing food into academia will sort of add that serious imprimatur that good research and academia does. Also, I love the way that it is playing out at UCLA in creating a

mandate that every undergrad be food literate, which I think is incredibly powerful. It'd be great for the listeners to understand what do you mean by food literate, you know, those two words are so big. I mean, to me, a person who's food literate, knows how to make food, I mean, even rudimentary Aliy they can feed themselves by transforming ingredients, not just purchasing a product that's already made. I mean, I think that's key to survival. And it's also a really can become a powerful way of creating bonds. I think, since the pandemic, we've all become so aware of how important social interaction is. But also, when we think about themes of injustice of all types, food is so centered and so much of that injustice, and I think, learning about why I'm learning about power structures, and learning how to be an effective activist in one's daily life to see the change, you know, be the change you want to see. Yeah, well, you know, what you just said covers a lot of the domains it's like a Venn diagram right in the middle of a literate individual and then also the food literate society of where you are hopefully living and residing. So you can aspire to be more ecological and environmentally minded at the same time to eat delicious food which I know is one of your big areas that you advocate for delicious in a healthful and well when food is raised in a really powerfully regenerative way, it is naturally delicious because nature is this amazing, powerful thing. It just wants us to survive. And so it's all already engineered for us to be more nutritive, the more nutritive a plant is generally the more delicious it is, which is kind of fabulous, you know?

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:59

So true. It's really whimsical what you called your class that you taught at UCLA. You want to share that with us?

E Evan Kleiman 05:07

I called it we are stardust. Yes. You know, it's funny, people thought that it was whimsical, or even frivolous title. But I find it very profound to think about how we're part of this greater system. And we're so lucky, because so far, we haven't found any like us out there. Everything on our planet that's natural, that isn't man made, came out of these explosions and incredible nuclear reactions out there. And so when we talk about the human biome, that magical amount of creatures that live on in in us we're talking about the way we are inextricably linked to the ground, to our terra firma. And I just think that that's very humbling to think about. And really important to remember, because as we watch, billionaires try and solve problems by leaving the planet, to quote TerraForm, somewhere else, it's a good reminder that we're already TerraForm here. And it would be really great if we could use some of those resources to make our Terra more resilient rather than less.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:28

So I think it's a perfect example of how you're able to present a subject with so many depths. Food literacy, everyone's going to enter it from different paths, right? from history, from science, from health, from the deliciousness.

E Evan Kleiman 06:47

And from art. I mean, I had a couple of artists in those classes whose class projects were visual

and from art. I mean, I had a couple of artists in those classes whose class projects were visual, and they added so much to the discussion. And it was just another way of understanding how using food as a lens is such a complex endeavor. What I found so interesting when I was teaching those classes is, is that culture comes into play. And is another thread that is just fascinating to unwind. And I asked the students to, to give me a plate to write down a meal that they thought about a lot, or they ate a lot. And it ranged from, you know, their favorite meals that their mothers made to an athlete talking about apples and peanut butter and how her life was all about apples and peanut butter. And each story I found incredibly moving. And it was a way for the students to look at their lives from a different viewpoint and maybe give it more value than they had previously. Because no matter where you are, even if what you're eating isn't, quote, the most healthy thing for you. It illuminates so much about their path and their struggle. And that way their change can come in. I mean, I think that's one reason why the Teaching Kitchen is so powerful. You know, when I first saw the UCLA teaching kitchen, I was kind of taken aback at how small it was. But then I realized when I started thinking about it, how powerful that is, because it creates a sense of intimacy. And intimacy, I think is at the heart of making food for oneself. For one another.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:43

Yeah, you know, that's so interesting that you came out with that kind of thought, because I just recently thought the same thing about our teaching kitchen because of the nature of this space, where we cook, it's a rectangular space, right? Where we can all look at each other around a rectangular space, and only 12 people fit. And so yeah, it's got that sense of joy and community and cooking together. Yes, you have to engage. Yeah, it's not like a class where the teacher is, is on a different level or far away from you. And you're looking at a mirrored image or screens on the side. So you can kind of check out while you're checking that box of taking this class. The social aspect, which is what you're talking about.

E Evan Kleiman 09:34

Right and the messiness of it, because you know, so many college students will all college students now have been raised during the period of food, television and the pervasiveness of food media. And of course, that image of perfection is just you know, is just imbued in so much food media and you know, to understand, it doesn't have to be looked like what it looks like, like Thanksgiving was just such a perfect time to sort of remind people of those lessons like that Norman Rockwell image of the turkey needs to die. You know, it's we don't have to aspire to that we just need to make a bit of a mess and then clean it up.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 10:22

So what you're saying is let's embrace our messiness, because that gives more accessibility to people to cook. Is that what you're trying to say?

E Evan Kleiman 10:30

Yes, yeah. Because I think and I see this when I teach adults, you know, I occasionally do cooking classes in people's homes, where groups of friends get together, and we all cook

together. And I see that, you know, grown, people are afraid to to make a mistake, like how much salt do I add? Well, how much salt Do you like? You know, you didn't put in a tablespoon? It says here a tablespoon? As if, you know, there's a recipe for life, I don't know that there is this a strict recipe for life. And food and cooking is life. It's it's more about getting familiar with the transformative process of ingredients. And anybody at any place can play with that until they get comfortable enough.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 11:28

What would you say? If you had the best of all worlds? How would you want to educate the next generation of health professionals? What would be your dream.

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Evan Kleiman 11:38

My dream would be that they take nutrition classes. I mean that that within the academic setting, there is a curriculum that is mandatory, where they understand food, and how food plays with the body. But then they just also sit at tables with colleagues who are from all over the world. Because lean meat and produce doesn't mean a white chicken breast and a side of broccoli. It can mean 100 different things, depending upon what culture you're from. So I think there's a sensitivity, they should somehow, and I think many people who are in urban settings, certainly in Los Angeles do this by going out to restaurants, but maybe there isn't a formal link made in which someone gives them the product of two different plates in front of them. And saying, this is appropriate, this is also appropriate. This is also appropriate. Because the last thing you would want to do as a physician is to demonize someone's culture by inappropriately commenting on their food choices.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 13:01

Well, that leads me to this movement about food is medicine. And I've wondered whether that medicalized is food, if you use that phrase, and I would love to know what your impression is of that.

E

Evan Kleiman 13:17

Well, I wish that we were hearing more food in medicine, rather than food as medicine, you know, if you look at what first and second gen immigrant chefs are writing about, and they're coming out with tons of cookbooks now, they they seem to take be taking the fruit of their childhood, what mom and grandma or Dad cooked, and play with it, sometimes adding Yes, the processed food of school lunch or their childhood as an homage, but also mixing in different types of produce that reflect the locale of where they are. And it's good to remember that if that few of us eat one way all week long. I mean, I hope people aren't doing that we we mix up meals, and we mix meals from the more memory celebratory based foods we enjoy, and the quote, helpful diet of less meat, more grains and produce. I think that that seems to be pretty pervasive with younger people who are not dealing with huge injustice problems.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 14:28

I so agree how important it is for physicians or anybody in healthcare for that matter to be culturally open. You know, we've been teaching our UCLA pediatricians in training for over two decades, how they might not know about the cultural practices of their patients, but they can be open to learn about. How would you want to shape that kind of conversation to be more inclusive?

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Evan Kleiman 14:52

Well, for me, you know, I mean, I was raised in LA in the 50s and 60s, a place where we ate fresh food. I mean, my mother cooked you know, she taught me to cook with ingredients there. Although Yes, TV dinners had started to encroach, and yes, there were frozen peas. But it was still very much on the margins. And I think a lot of traditional food cultures rely on actual ingredients. And that process of transformation happening in the home kitchen, rather than in in some externalized industrial setting. It just happened up for me, my imprinting was in Italy, I graduated from high school, very, very young, and chose to take a year before going to college. And so, and I had always worked as a kid, because I'm an only child of a single parent. So I had enough money to pay for a charter flight. charter flight to Europe to travel. And it turned out that that first trip was so transformative for me in terms of opening up my mind to the world that I begged borrowed, I just did everything I possibly could to get scholarships or grants for several subsequent summers. And that's how I managed to spend so much time in Italy. And so because I was so young, really, my palate was formed there. And it was the first place I had my own apartment and did my own food shopping independently from my mother's needs. I mean, I had always shopped and cooked for my mother and I from a pretty young age, but it's different when you're on your own halfway around the world. So the flow of, of what I ate, and when I ate, became kind of templated to this Italian flow and over time was natural to me. And, you know, we haven't talked about much about spirituality yet. But the way that food weaves its way through a day or a year, in traditional cultures, has its own kind of ritual that is extremely comforting. Whereas we as Americans tend to be so scattered, you know, like, we're just as likely to eat in the car, in front of the TV. It's like food isn't pin to a culture, always. It kind of just floats out there for the grabbing. And, you know, for me, those the coffee hours, the breaks for the day to check in with a friend over a snack, the Sunday lunches, they all create a rhythm of, of life in general that I find to this day, very anxiety and stress relieving. And you know, I don't do it all the time. But every time I go back to Italy, I'm reminded of why I just feel so good when I'm there. And and it is because that there's there's a time and a place that you give yourself to sit down and eat.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:05

Right? Well, that's fair. It's a very European way of life. And I think your routines and rituals have been identified in the scientific literature to prove to be a much healthier way to eat in general. So you're identifying the cultural and traditional way of eating in Italy, and also in France, all these different places that very little snacking.

E

Evan Kleiman 18:29

Yeah, and I think that's probably true all over the world. That's right, or, and even in a country

like India, this enormous country where food is so regional, and where so much food happens on the street. So much of that food is like real food that's being transformed in front of you. It's, it's, you know, it's not coming from an unknown place. And it's interesting in my mother's later years, I noticed that the way she was so routinized in the way she fed herself, you know, breakfast and lunch and dinner at very at pretty much the same time every single day. And there was a routine of what she ate wasn't necessarily the same every day but the template was the same every day. And you know, she had tremendous longevity she lived to be 96, and was independent until almost the very end and I would sometime look at her and go oh my god how boring to live like that. But now I see that as a way of kind of honoring your own needs.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:44

You touched a bit on the Slow Food chapter in your life, so to speak. And I I want to understand you know what the manifesto for slow food which is it says Slow Food guarantees a better future. Can you elaborate on that?

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Evan Kleiman 19:59

It's so funny you know i It's been a long time since I've been deeply involved with slow food. But when Slow Food first started, it was revolutionary in centering products, stories and lives of artists and producers. And of course it originated in Italy, this small country. I mean, California is the size of Italy, who's linked to the countryside and to people who make food and the countryside is so deep still to this day. And yet when it was started by Karl Carlo Petrini, it was a moment where they see the the kind of us juggernaut of industrial food looming on the horizon, the first McDonald's had open and the piazza di spagna yet in Rome, creating just a ton of media frenzy and havoc with people who were afraid of losing this deep food culture that they had. Now, so much of that original ethos of focusing on artisanal producers is now transmitted through such a larger lens. And through recognition of all these issues that we've been talking about sustainability, originality of food, the importance of local food sheds as a bulwark against problems with long chain distribution in the food space, as we saw during the pandemic, I think that what it'll answer food taught me is that old ways can teach us a lot. And like most things in life, food production doesn't have to be binary, it doesn't have to be either a lonely Shepherd on a hill, or a massive industrialized poultry factory, there can be a range of, of opportunities and solutions, as long as we concentrate on not creating more problems, ie what people call externalities. And so just drilling down and figuring out better ways to harvest water to clean water to separate drinking water from water that is used to irrigate crops to look at more resilient and regenerative agricultural systems that are better for the worker, you know, you can bring in issues of immigration and politics, it kind of food becomes this vortex into which all of these issues, you know, are constantly circulating around one another. And perhaps the stress that we're feeling now, through the effects of incipient climate change, will push us to start to actually create economic incentive to make good change, as opposed to just change driven by greed.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:56

I'd love to hear your current inspiration these days, what you're curious about who you might be curious about what culture or what individual coming in the next years for inspiration?

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Evan Kleiman 23:11

The fact that I get to be the host of good food is, is still in astonishment to me. You know, I had this long career as a restaurateur and a chef, which was wonderful. And I loved it, because I, you know, I'm a cook, you know, I love cooking. But there was always this intellectual part of myself this total, you know, I'm not a foodie, I'm a food nerd. And, you know, I started reading about food when I was like, 9, 10. And, and so good food just feeds that it of constant curiosity. You know, I'm constantly meeting a new generation, much like you do on campus. And I'm inspired by how younger people and I, you know, I'm talking about people who could be in their 40s. But but you know, younger people, people in the food space. People who think about food who write about food or involved with food, are activists. It's a gift to constantly encounter people who are not of your generation. And they inspire me. You know, I recently interviewed two members of culinary collaborative called Ghetto Gastro, who use food as a way to discuss race and power. And they do multimedia collaborations out in the real world that involve everything from painting to poetry, fashion dance, and they have a new cookbook out that's a fantastic coffee table book, which I know I will pour over for months to come. Every recipe has a piece of art, a painting, or a poem or a suggested piece of music associated had with it. And just the mixing of all of these things together with food to tell a fuller story is fascinating and engaging and instructive. I just am constantly learning so much. You know, we have a chef in town, and Natalia Pereira. She has a downtown restaurant called Woodstone. But you know more than a chef or a cook, I would call her an artist and we're so lucky to get to encounter her in a restaurant setting. She wrote a book last year called abundancia. That is so moving and so unexpected. And the way she tells her own story as a child in Brazil, and her relationship with her mother and connects it to how she cooks. And there's painting throughout the book. It's just, I just, it's moving. I just love it. And then there are local chefs who give themselves like challenges like creating a long lost recipe. Recently, Danielle Bell who, with her husband, Pablo of Sardinia, they run a catering business kind of pop up called the porous and she recently found a recipe for an ice cream called Nestle road Bula from the long gone, la ice cream parlor real rights. It's it's an unusually complex process. And she decided that she would dedicate herself to it, she nailed it. And I bought a quart of it. You know, when I read that she was doing this I you know, I ordered a quart and I bought it. And I teared up at the first bite. You know this work that she did manage to unlock a childhood memory of mine. So I have inspiration everywhere.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 26:58

That is so cool that you unlocked a childhood memory by tasting ice cream. The way the brain works forever amazes me, like neuroscientists have long observed that memories can be unlocked through our senses like Dr. Oliver Sacks, who noticed with one Parkinson patient having a burst of agility when she visited a garden. And I've read that patients with dementia can often remember the verses to a song when listening to the tune of that song. just phenomenal. Our last question on our live well podcasts these days is to ask, what does it mean for you to live well?

E

Evan Kleiman 27:34

Well, I think more and more for me, it's just about being around people, I have a very strong tendency to spend too much time alone, which the pandemic really reinforced. And I have

discovered quite strongly that I feel so much better in all ways when I spend time with friends. And cooking for friends is my sweet spot. But you know, it doesn't have to be elaborate. It doesn't have to be a huge plan. It doesn't have to be 20 people. You know, I'm having two girlfriends over for dinner tonight. And I'm going to make soup.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:09

Amazing. Your secret sauce so to speak for you how to live well, which I agree with. They say poor social well being is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. So apparently 20% of our population increased in terms of matter of being socially isolated. So go out, meet with friends or meet new friends around food, but better recipe for food in medicine.

E

Evan Kleiman 28:37

Absolutely. You meet somebody for coffee. sit outside. Well, it's so lovely.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:47

What an honor to be able to interview you that was like a dream come true for me. We are so glad you joined us today in this conversation. To learn more about today's guest and to explore the entire podcast archive, visit our website@healthy.ucla.edu and find the podcast page under the media tab. If you enjoy this episode, the best way to support the show is to subscribe on Spotify and Apple podcasts. And if you can leave a review or share on social media even better. If you have any guests suggestions, visit our website for the submission form or email us live_well@ucla.edu or direct message us on Instagram at healthy UCLA. Visit the show notes on our website or on whatever platform you're currently listening to and check out organizations ideas or people mentioned in this episode. Thanks for being on this journey with us. This episode has been brought to you by the Semel healthy campus initiative Center at UCLA