

LiveWell Interview Transcript, Homa Dashtaki

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SPEAKERS

Homa Dashtaki, Dr. Wendy Slusser

H Homa Dashtaki 00:02

With the yogurt I have these very strict flavors that are true to my nostalgia of childhood in Iran but with the way I feel completely a whimsical and pick whatever flavors I feel like whatever flavors I think go well with this new ingredient and so I allow myself that level of play.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:22

Hello friends welcome back to the LiveWell Podcast. We're so happy to have you back. Today we've got a really phenomenal guest gonna be telling us about the dreamiest creamiest yogurt of all time. Homa Dashtaki is a multi talented woman making yogurt magic at the White Moustache, based out of Brooklyn, New York, which has garnered much acclaim from New York Times, Vogue, bon appetit, food and wine. And of course, my super fan sister Sarah. A UCLA graduate herself, Homa ultimately pivoted from her law degree to make yogurt with her family to honor the slow and intentional ritual of heating, cooling and straining the yogurt, and in addition, preserving the way from being wasted is a sacred and ancestral practice. She honors her Iranian cultural identity and she makes labor intensive, small batch yogurt under the name The White moustache. Named after her father's, well, white moustache. Homa recently published a beautiful part cookbook, part lyrical memoir called Yogurt and Whey: Recipes of Iranian immigrant life, which showcases a plethora of ways to transform the sacred product way. Learn about some of these recipes, the pillars in homeless work, the revolutionary nature of small batch production, and what it looks like to reclaim and honor cultural heritage through food. This is truly a special episode. I hope you enjoy it. Welcome, Homa Dashtaki, we're just so grateful for you to be part of our LiveWell podcast.

H Homa Dashtaki 02:06

Thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited for this conversation.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:10

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:10

Fantastic. So I've been looking forward to it. My sister is a super fan of your, your product. I have a couple of questions from her later on in this podcast that I think we'll throw at you and maybe even open it up to some of your super fans after they listen to this podcast, they might have some questions to ask. And we maybe can send them your way.

H Homa Dashtaki 02:32

I love that. Yes, please. Yeah, I make the product with my sister. So I'm very fond of sister relationships and questions. So fantastic.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:42

Well, so you're a graduate of UCLA majoring in comparative literature, and also a lawyer by trade. And then you found your way, starting the small business with your dad. And in an article with Fast Company written by Nikita Richardson. And you said that starting White Moustache with your dad was just something to get us through. We didn't want to start a business. We just needed therapy. What was that about?

H Homa Dashtaki 03:15

I'm laughing because it kind of rings true even today. So when I started White Moustache, I was, I had just been laid off maybe two years before that. And in 2009, I was laid off in the financial crisis. I'm 35 years old, living at home with my parents, my dad was retired and just like, super annoying, and like, there's two of us at home being super grumpy and annoying. And we just needed something to do something other than the daily grind of whatever it was we were preoccupied with. And so I almost bullied him into like, going with me to farmers markets going with me to the kitchen to like, we were making like eight gallons worth of yogurt a week and taking it to the farmers market. And it kept us quite busy. And you know, I really loved it. And I think it's an example of like micro economies like we would have been so happy to just produce for our local community in California. And to make that yogurt and to have a presence and to build community and yes to make a little bit of income and you know, that would have given such a lift to our family, both economically Sure, but also like spiritually and emotionally. And I think that was the one thing that I felt most validated when we first started out was just the reaction and engagement with people having the yogurt and really liking it. That's that's very motivating. Wow,

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:48

You really turn lemons into lemonade during that recession in 2008. So now let's get into the details of how you make your unique delicious and beloved yogurt.

H Homa Dashtaki 05:03

I mean, it is a very magical process like making yogurt. It's using the most sacred ingredient on the planet, which is milk, which is like, you know, the, the method milk of an animal that we

the planet, which is milk, which is like, you know, the, the mother's milk of an animal that we have the privilege to use it as an ingredient. We mix it with live probiotics to make yogurt, I take three days to make my yogurt from milk to final product. And when I think about how we've made it at home, versus how we make it at the factory, versus how I want to scale up, the word efficiency never enters the conversation, the word larger batches never enters the conversation is how do we make more small batches, knowing this is a labor intensive process. Knowing this goes against all norms, knowing that even as we enter the distribution channels, like this sort of product has an uphill battle, right, like we have a short sell by day, we have very limited quantities, and yet we advocate for as as democratic a price as we possibly can, but not compromise on any of the ingredients or the milk source that we use. And these things have almost been detrimental for business, because they're hard things to hold on to and still turn a profit or make money. And, you know, like, we do feel jealous of other companies that you know, can just turn a switch and all of a sudden, double their production, we will never be able to do that. But we do feel like we're engaging in the magic that is food making, we're engaging in the alchemy, that is yogurt making, we're providing, you know, a product that's you know, prepackaged, and on the shelves for you to have that's as close to the natural ingredients as we can get like it is highly perishable, like it will not last, like for 90 days on the shelf. And I think that's a good thing. And I know the challenges that presents like, I will never be distributed nationwide, I probably will never be courted by big investors. And, and these are all, you know, almost validations of like, okay, we're making a real product. And we've stayed kind of true to the small batch process. And even down to like the fruit processing. Like right now at the factory. We have, you know, hundreds and pounds of quince that's in season here in New York. And they're getting cornered and chopped and cooked in small batches. And just yesterday, I had a conversation with one of my colleagues is helping me with that. And he's like, I can cook this in like a huge vat and like still get the same consistencies. And you know, like, there was a little tension for me to be like, we're gonna do this this inefficient way, you know, and these are good conversations to have, right? It's the intersection now for me in my business of growth and integrity.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:12

Wow, you're a rule breaker, but at the same time a leader innovator and being an example to people who could actually potentially imitate it in their own home, which you have opened your door to in terms of your cookbooks and so forth. And actually, you just opened up a question that my sister you're one of your super fans had was, you talked about some of your processing of your yogurts. And she wants to know How do you keep your walnuts crunchy in orange blossom walnut yogurt?

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Homa Dashtaki 08:46

Because these are all the secrets for your sister. One is we toast the walnuts right before they go into the yogurt. So it removes a little bit of the moisture already in the walnut. So it's it's nice and toasted. We cut them to crunchy saw and like various crunchy size pieces. And so that all gets cut by hand. Totally masochistic. And then it goes into our Greek yogurt. And the Greek yogurt already has the liquid waste drained out of it. So that walnut doesn't have very much opportunity to draw up a lot of moisture, and even the little moisture that it does draw up. It's surrounded in like the solids of the yogurt. So it's a little bit in cased, and I think it retains a bit more of its crunchiness than otherwise would.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 09:39

You've just given a lot of details that I'm hopeful that many of us could learn from your cookbooks as well. So you're in New York now but you started in California with your dad, and you created this new life path with your dad, in that same article from Fast Company that you mentioned. Also, "I don't know what it is about this yogurt, but it's the first authentic thing I've ever done. It's like bringing in this other part of my identity that I've never really given a lot of credit to. I didn't even know how to celebrate being different." Could you elaborate on that?

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Homa Dashtaki 10:16

That's a quote and a theme that I feel like whenever I talk about or whenever it comes up, it resonates with a lot, a lot of people and I've been really moved by that. But for me, that feeling came from, you know, like being a lawyer and like graduating UCLA and going to law school and kind of checking off all the lists of being your, you know, your dutiful immigrant and like, very much having a chip on my shoulder of wanting to like belong here wanting to or feeling like I needed to earn my place here. And all of that kind of fell away when I was making this yogurt, like I was doing something that had just generationally been handed down to me that we took for granted in our home. That came with a kind of ease that I didn't experience when I was studying, or when I was being ambitious, like it just was there, it was easy. And it's the fact that it's led to these opportunities that has led to the kind of success that puts me on a podcast like this is really beautiful. And it just lets me know that like, I've done something that really resonates to my true self. And that's why it connects with other people as well.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 11:37

Wow, that's really beautifully stated. And I have to say, this transference of cultural and familiar knowledge through food is so powerful in it. A lot of people refer to as like your microbiome is speaking to you, which of course, we'll talk about microbiomes, a little later related to the yogurt itself, but this kind of revelation of your cultural heritage and integrating into your work. What is that? Where is it leading to?

H

Homa Dashtaki 12:08

I don't know where it's leading me to I do know where I'm at with it now is like a lot of peace and a lot of strength. And it's made my voice quiver less a little bit, as I talk about things I want, as I talk about what I value, it's made me let go of certain things that I thought were important that may not have been, as I build my business. And I think for me, the next challenge in terms of where I go is building a team, and how to sort of share these things about me and about this business with others knowing that, you know, everyone's fingerprints are going to be on what we create together and, and allowing for that. So I'm hoping that it leads to a little bit of intelligence as I embark on this next chapter.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 13:00

That's a great way to transfer what you've learned to others. as well as building a team. And

one of the things that I've noticed in your work, and what has been out in the media is that you're a great storyteller, every element of the milk from the cow, you've identified as something that might relate to your background, but also your techniques. If you could tell me a story that describes your yogurt, how do you describe it through storytelling.

H

Homa Dashtaki 13:29

So in the cookbook, I dedicate like way too many pages and talking about the the yogurt making process, and I do it in terms of a poem, almost like a dance or a poem. And, and I think if I were to tell one quick story, as you've asked it, I would say, the telephone, like the rotary dial telephone with the spiral cord that you pick up and you call someone. And like yogurt making is like a conversation. And it takes a long time for something fruitful to come of it. But like, as yogurt does, like you have to boil the milk, you have to cool the milk, you have to wait for the right temperature. And then you have to add the probiotics to it for it to incubate over a long period of time. And that, to me is best done in the context of a conversation like the amount of times I've made a batch of yogurt while on the phone with my mom or my sister or my aunt or a friend. And we're just gossiping. It's that same sort of cadence of a conversation and then you like hit the end and even that conversation after you're done with it incubates over time and that's that's probably how I would describe it today.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 14:40

I love that. So in the past, perhaps it was in the same room but now you can do it even virtually and keep that same sense of community while you're making the yogurt.

H

Homa Dashtaki 14:53

My sister is going to make a night batch tonight, one of our first evening batches and she's going to set it to go to sleep overnight, and we're definitely going to be talking on the phone tonight as she does.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 15:06

That's fantastic. In your Recipe Book, *Yogurt and Why: Recipes of an Iranian immigrant*, you share recipes manipulating way with different methods. Can you give me more detail on that process based on this metaphor of a conversation as well? Yeah.

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Homa Dashtaki 15:23

So the the whey is the resulting liquid that comes from the yogurt straining process. So you're left with this beautiful liquid that comes from the end of this yogurt making process you've heated and cooled and incubated, then you've let time do its thing. Then you chill the yogurt for a whole day. And then you strain the yogurt. And at the end of that process, you dripped out using only gravity drops of pure liquid yogurt away full of probiotics full of calcium, full of B 12 vitamins. And in the course of this book, I was so excited with a sense of urgency to get the

word out on what this ingredient could do. And you know, I make cocktails with it, I brine with it. I pickle with it, I freeze it. You know, I always joke like it chops it dices it slices it you know, Julian's it does everything. And in the context of the conversation metaphor, a lot of the inspiration that came for the way recipes came in community, Chef Rob gives me the gazpacho recipe, Dan Barber gives me the cocktail recipe. And it was, you know, wonderful to connect with chefs in New York City to come up with these recipes, because I'm not a trained cook. I just love my yogurt. And I love my waist so much. And I wanted to inspire people to use it. And so I had conversations I had, you know, these moments where I was like, I have this that's available, does this inspire you? And many times it did not. But the few times that it did, we're really just lovely. It's like them, that spark we just clicked. And so those things made it into the book. And I feel very lucky for that.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 17:13

Wow, you've just met mentioned some legends that have offered up their support in your work, Dan Barber. And the reason I know you is through Bill Yossess, another legend chef, former White House pastry chef. And I have to say that they all do concentrate just like you do. It sounds like in terms of making sure we don't waste any of the food that we touch that there's always a purpose for it, which I think is really the way of the future in terms of not only the health and well being of our individuals, but our Mother Earth, right. So in my work promoting breastfeeding, and teaching mothers and fathers and pediatric residents and medical students, I always teach them how to remember what breast milk has, in terms of the majority of their of the protein in breast milk is whey and I say it's an it's way better. Yeah. So when you're selling your products with the whey protein, how do you manage people thinking it's the gym protein powder, and not something that's more of a delicacy like you're describing you've repurposed it for?

H

Homa Dashtaki 18:25

Yeah, I mean, this is such a timely question, because ever since 2014, I've kind of been advocating for the way and coming up against roadblocks that are exactly this about overcoming a lot of preconceptions about what way is like, oh, it's liquid, it's not powdered, oh, it doesn't have this kind of protein, I find that it has been difficult to kind of get the messaging, right. And I've wondered if I can't just call it something else to make it more accessible and just does nothing has really stuck. But even the word way is a very complicated word. And I think the reason I found out is because I do live in this like emotional religious place with the ingredient. And I need to learn the language of science around it, which I have, you know, it doesn't come naturally to me because I do revere this ingredient almost in like a very spiritual way. And so it's been tough for me to elaborate on it in a more scientific context or to discuss it in a more scientific context. The closest I've gotten is some of these recipes, where I explore the different things that we can do. I think that that needs to be the next chapter in terms of how I approach my own understanding of what this magical ingredient is and how to make it accessible and exciting and interesting to a larger audience.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:51

So how would you address the common narrative also of dairy as bad. I mean, that's the other narrative that's out there, not just that whey. As a whey powder, but dairy.

H

Homa Dashtaki 20:02

Not only is it one of the most sacred ingredients on the planet, it's one of the most controversial ingredients on the planet. And I think the conversation is very valid like commercial, highly commercial dairy or mass producing milk or treating it like a commodity is scary. And I think responsible dairies have existed for years, and we're so proud to be working with the coop in upstate New York to provide us with milk. These are generations of dairy farmers that know not only how to take care of their cows, but also I'd take care of the land, like part of their work is land preservation. And I have nothing but respect and reverence for their method like of stewardship for these animals and the land but also then the milk that they provide me, I've made a pretty unshakeable vow with them that like, they're going to be the only milk source I use. So if there's a snowstorm, or if they go down, or if there's a situation, that I can't get milk for them, then we don't make any yogurt. And conversely, they're their cows need to be milked twice a day. So, you know, we've committed to taking that amount of milk. So pandemic, be damned, you're getting that milk, those cows still need to be milked twice a day. And it was almost that relationship and that like relying on each other, that kept us going. And you know, knowing that they're inscrutable and uncompromising in how they run their coop, and where they source their milk and how they treat their cows, is important. And I think, you know, criticizing all of our food sources, even like, you know, plant based foods, and like the toll that some of those harvests and mono crops have on our environment is really important. I welcome this challenge to all forms of agriculture.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:00

Thank you for bringing that up. I think that responsible food companies are taking it on more to be looking at all of their their entire food chain from the animal or the farming technique, or the workers how they're treated all the way through to the end product. And then what happens with waste that comes from the production. So your methodology is really one that is like a great case study for others to learn. And I think that our business school students at UCLA and across the country could really learn from this as a method of how you can ethically produce food in a manner that ends up with a delicious product. Speaking of which, I you know, you mentioned earlier about how the shelf life is not as long as other yogurt products. But I have to say, having a good product doesn't necessarily require you to have a long shelf life because the demand is so high.

H

Homa Dashtaki 22:59

We're very lucky for our super fans, because I am convinced I only have five customers, one of them being your sister that just buy multiple jars of yogurt. So we'll take good care of those customers that we have. Thank you for that. But back to your that other point that you just made that was so important about the business school, and students and being a case study, I think something that I want to constantly make myself vulnerable and available to is how even we can do it better. Like even with all of these convictions and stubbornness, and even white mustache can do 100 things better. And part of that is just the nature of what's accessible. And like I'm very proud of all the decisions that we make. But it is so good to just admit that we're not perfect, and that I welcome the sort of the conversations to make things better. And that

does come mainly from students. And this generation of kids who challenge a lot of stuff is very exciting to me, and what they're going to produce based on examples that we set for them now.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:06

I so agree, I think that's a great motto for most people to think that you can always do something better. And that's that quality improvement, like approach has served everyone well in different sectors. You know, we talked about specifics about the way and also just the sort of overall umbrella of your product being from milk, dairy. And the other thing that yogurt has that many people are looking towards is, you know, probiotics and you mentioned that as one of your ingredients which you need, right? You need cultures to create your yogurt, you know, how have you use that as a method for marketing and its relationship? I mean, the microbiome obviously probiotics is a form of food for you the microbiome in your gut.

H

Homa Dashtaki 24:55

You know, the probiotics that are in the yogurt and the whey are a consistent part of like an Iranian diet first because we eat yogurt, mainly with lunch and dinner. And while it is, you know, a culinary tradition, I also do believe that it's because these are more generally heavier meals that needed aid in digestion. And so our yogurt is mainly savory, it's provided as a condiment, or even as a drink to help you digest your food. And it's present at every meal. And it's hardly ever a breakfast food when your stomach is empty in the morning. And that's something we talk about.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:34

You know, reflecting on culture and cultural traditions, often, there are some very positive and unhelpful and also meaningful parts to it that can enhance your well being in so many different ways. And, you know, you majored in comparative literature, and you've talked a lot about culture and meaning of life in this work that you're doing. What did you bring from your major of comparative literature that might have enhanced that viewpoint or expanded it?

H

Homa Dashtaki 26:08

It was the power of lyrical writing about letting yourself be seen and in writing in a way that like, maybe like people would have access to you through your words, were in spoken or visual or connection, something might be missing. And so to me, I felt like it was in writing that I could fill in the gaps of what I was trying to say, I do believe in storytelling as a result of my experience. in comparative literature. I think most of the recipes I've written are stories, and I think food and ingredients. And methodology is a way for me to use that as a language to talk about my life and my experiences, and my frustrations and, and the things I want to celebrate. And so food became my language, to share these things. And I think that was planted in my, with Professor Rob Schneider over at the Comparative Literature Department at UCLA.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:18

Right on. Comparative literature is such a sort of cross subject area, right. And so you've created a business model with multiple pillars and a mission. And I'd love you to sort of describe your values, and or pillars of your work and mission that would resonate with our listeners.

H

Homa Dashtaki 27:40

I think ingredients is one of the biggest pillars like I, I worship ingredients, whether it's milk, which is an ingredient for making yogurt, or if it's like the alphabet, which is the ingredient for making words. I just think these things deserve a level of reverence that helped me make good decisions about what to do with these ingredients. And I hold pretty steadfast to that. And I think another pillar that I'm slowly admitting to myself I indulgent is whimsy, like to allow myself to be playful. And I do it a lot with the way you know, with the yogurt, I have these very strict flavors that are true to my nostalgia of childhood in Iran, but with the way I feel completely a whimsical and pick whatever flavors, I feel like whatever flavors I think go well with this new ingredient. And so I allow myself that level of play, and whimsy in my business, which is great. I think authenticity, especially when things get ugly, or when things get messy to really embrace that. It is a source of strength.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:54

I love that ingredients, whimsy authenticity, with those kinds of pillars. What do you foresee the future is for or the goal in your work?

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Homa Dashtaki 29:08

I hope I create a team who can help me again, like create the like the fabric of what comes next. I think I've built what I wanted to build, and I'm so proud and in love with it. And I don't think I could do more on my own. I don't want to do more on my own. So I think for me, it's to take these pillars and to align myself with and hopefully inspire folks who want to kind of help me with the next steps.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:37

I like that there are two last questions. One is just very practical. Where can we buy your yogurt in LA or also others other cities?

H

Homa Dashtaki 29:49

So we have our our main production facility we self produce in Brooklyn, New York. So we're available in New York City in Brooklyn and various stores. So, and grocery stores, gourmet, grocery tea shops, and in Los Angeles were only available in one spot and we make in the

basement of the Eataly at Century City, and we bring the yogurt up to yourself shelves fresh daily. So that's a very wonderful foothold we have in our hometown of California.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:21

I bet those fly off the shelves, so I'm gonna have to go over there early. So And finally, we usually end our podcast with a question to our guests, which is, what does it mean for you to live well?

H Homa Dashtaki 30:35

To live with ease.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:37

Thank you, I have to digest that one.

H Homa Dashtaki 30:40

Yeah, me too. I think it's something I have the most trouble with. And it's like moments where I feel like things are unraveling or I'm not clenching too tightly. I'm like, Okay, this makes sense. In my whole body. This is like, I've completely young clenched, and you feel like I'm making right decisions. I'm able to be creative, I'm able to be present. And to me that lives in the word ease.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:05

Thank you for that definition. And it brought up images of you making your yogurt.

H Homa Dashtaki 31:11

In the quiet of the night. Yeah.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:15

Well, thank you so much, how much what a treat, to talk to you and to learn more about how you created this amazing product from start to finish with your dad and your sister. What a lovely idea for all of us to look to our strengths of our family to build something in a dream and build from our culture and and adapt it to our current culture.

H Homa Dashtaki 31:42

Thank you so much for having me. Now I'm gonna go do a deep dive on breast milk and whey.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:50

Way better way better. Homa has left us a lot to sit with, and a lot of yogurt to crave. You can certainly say she ate those cravings by purchasing her cookbook called yogurt and way recipes of an Iranian immigrant life. But I also imagine you can satiate your desire for life balance as Homer mentions, by moving through an act of creation. Be that a meal, a craft, a piece of art with intention and slowness. That's what I'll be sitting with over the next couple of weeks.

Thanks, Tahoma. And thanks to all our loyal listeners for joining us on the LiveWell podcast. Let us know how you liked this episode and have a wonderful week.