

# Bill Yosses LiveWell Interview Transcript

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## SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Bill Yosses

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**B** Bill Yosses 00:00

Languages don't last as long as cooking recipes sometimes. I mean it's really it's kind of a language unto itself. And I find it fascinating the way we relate to food. And we keep circling back to these very basic ways of feeding ourselves

**D** Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:23

Hi UCLA live well podcast listeners, welcome back or to our first time listeners welcome. Hear at LiveWell, credibility meets creativity in the world of health and well being. And the podcast story today is no exception. Bill Yosses is as credible as they come. I mean, he was the White House pastry chef for seven years, including helping build Michelle Obama's White House garden, and he's a well known author and chef at Blue Hill Farm restaurant. He is at the cutting edge of innovation when it comes to the intersection of food, the environment and human health. It may seem ironic for an acclaimed pastry chef to be doing work creating delicious, sustainable healthful foods, but not for Bill. Like the muffin recipe created with pistachio paste that normally gets thrown away, or the chocolate mousse he makes with no heavy cream. You are really in for a treat, as Bill shares his deep wisdoms and life experiences on this episode, enjoy. Well, you may know Bill as he was the former White House pastry chef under President George W. Bush and Barack Obama. He has a Master's of Arts at Rutgers University in French Language and Literature and a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Toledo. In French language, Ville left his White House position in June 2014, to work on a new project focusing on food literacy, aimed to teach young children and adults about eating better. And this is when I met him. And I'm so excited to learn more about his work and his life for this episode. So let's dive in.

**B** Bill Yosses 02:05

Thank you. Thanks. I'm excited always to talk with you. And I also want to hear what you've been up to.

**D****Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:12**

Thank you, Bill. I just know that you're, you're full of wisdom. And in order for us to get a feel for your history. And that wisdom. I'd love for you to walk us through the phases of your career. And what were the takeaways of each phase. So what did you learn when you started out working in restaurants developing recipes, I guess we'll start there.

**B****Bill Yosses 02:37**

Yeah, that's that's a good place to start. Compared to a lot of people I started somewhat late. I was about, I think 24 or 25. And as you mentioned, I am a Francophile. I love France, I love the history, the literature, the and one thing I hadn't come across, a very in depth was the food until I lived there. And then that was a real revelation. And I was lucky enough to get a job in Paris when I was staying there. And I think what was the most eye opening was going to the commercial, the wholesale market, which is still there, still fantastic. It's called Runjis. So I used to go there with my boss, the chef of the restaurant, and we would read by our provisions, I think we went about three times a week. So that was just an eye opener, because it was a it's a huge area where all the food is in different hangars. And it's all divided into categories. Like there's one for fruits or several for fruits. One for vegetables, there's meats, there's what they call a bar, which is laser bar are organ meats. And of course, they have one for cheese, fish, etc. And the quality of the food was really stunning to me, too. I had already been living in New York and eating in restaurants. So I was sort of, you know, a little bit familiar with restaurant quality. But this was, this was way above and beyond this, this was in the 80s. That's 1980s folks, not 1880s. The 1980s .Yeah, so that was really the first phase. I think that's what convinced me I would like to do this.

**D****Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:32**

When you describe the image of that marketplace, it reminds me I just visited Italy and Pompeii the Roman times they had a separation of different things that they would have for sale. Also the fish and then the meat in the in the vegetable so interesting that it's carried on since then.

**B****Bill Yosses 04:56**

Well, I think you know, there's so many things that when I think about food and The art the way we cook and the way we eat. I mean, there's some very, what can I say universal or long standing sort of habits, like we're making bread, the same way the Egyptians did, like 4000 years ago, it's four ingredients. It's water, salt, yeast, and flour, or some kind of grain. languages don't last as long as cooking recipes, sometimes. I mean, it's really it's kind of a language unto itself. And I find it fascinating the way we relate to food. And we keep circling back to these very basic ways of feeding ourselves, whether it's breadmaking, or the way we cook our food, whether it's braising roasting, grilling, of course, there's a lot of modern versions now of this with sous vide are vacuum packed food. But what I mean to say is that the language of food, I think, is relatively unchanged for the last maybe five or 6000 years. The benefit to us of that is understanding how people ate in the past. And I've been reading these

books recently about Blue Zones in the world and where people live beyond 100 years old, not everyone, of course, but a larger percentage in Okinawa and Sicily and Greece. So they're, they're basically sort of, you know, just following the culinary habits of their ancestors.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:36

I mean, you're almost hinting to how you might I don't know if this is true, but how you build recipes, you go from the the basic, traditional, you know, steps? And then you take it from there? I don't know.

B

Bill Yosses 06:52

Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, the foundations of cooking work, no matter what area of the world you're in, whether it's France or South America, Africa, Asia, those things are tried and true. Now, there is a lot of innovation, and I'm all for it. I think it's wonderful. I'm actually here, I'm here at Stone barns Center for Food and Agriculture, where I work now at Blue Hill restaurant is the name of the restaurant with a very progressive chef, Dan Barber. And again, I'm sure he would agree with us saying that those, those cultural foundations and culinary foundations are where we start, because those have been tried and true and shown to be healthy. But he we do have a lot of innovative programs here. In fact, this week, someone that you know who is a specialist in microbiology is working with us. It's just fascinating. I mean, he's still again, he's using culinary traditions, but he as a researcher, is studying the microbiology behind, for example, fermented foods. So we all sort of, I suppose, have been reading about the microbiome and the health of this trillion plus bacteria that live inside of us. And that's his specialty. So he's adapting fermented foods from Java, it seems like almost every culture in the world has these fermented foods. And I mean, kimchi and Korea or soy sauce in Japan, of course, us with cheese and wine. But he started a using a new culture. But it's similar to Koji, the bacteria that's used to make soy sauce and, and miso. But it's very adaptable. And he's applying it to different forms of rice. And finding it produces a lot of byproducts through the fermentation. One of them is ethyl acetate, which we know to be an anti inflammatory. So these cultures have been doing this for 1000s of years. And sort of, he's investigating how these might have health benefits for us today.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 09:13

I love that basic science linking to something that we do every day to protect our health and well being that is accessible to all of us. And in a way what you're just describing this food that's fermented, is one of the ingredients that they identified in the Blue Zones, right. That was one of the common with fermented food with the twist of that culture.

B

Bill Yosses 09:37

Absolutely. It's just interesting to go around the world and see how they ferment. I mean, I'm, as you know, I worked on a project in West Africa. And one of their essential ingredients is called Dawa Dawa and that is fermented locust beans. I mean, walk around New York City, as I do at this time of year, and you see locust beans all over the sidewalks because the trees,

they're prolific in New York. But of course, we never thought to do anything with them. It adds a wonderful element of umami and meatiness to the recipes that they use it for. That just gives me a great segue to consider your ability to take things that normally might be wasted and create something delicious. We had the great fortune of having you come and focus on food waste at UCLA and develop or you had developed some recipes, one of which was that last shoe bun recipe, I would love for you to walk us through how you put that kind of recipe together, something that is often thrown away pistachio paste. Yeah, this was this is relatively, I think, sort of in your face for chefs. Because you know, we're in a kitchen. And we're always, you know, trying to please a customer, of course. So we deal with high quality products, and they come, whether it's a fruit with skins on it, or like a banana peel or whatever. And so we throw it, we throw that part away, or at least we used to. But there's sort of been awareness over the last few years that these products, first of all, it's wasteful. And it's not helping the environment unless you're composting it, which is one option. The thing that we began to work and this was Dan barbers introduction to me was contact food production companies, and see what they're throwing away. So in that case, it was we went to a pistachio oil manufacturer, so they were crushing the seat, the pistachios. And imagine like, how many pistachios you have to crush to get a quart of oil, it's a lot. And so and they were rejecting what was left the fibrous part of the pistachio, which still had a lot of flavor. Yeah, what we did was dry it out a little bit roasted a little bit, which brings out more flavor. And then we ground it into a powder. And we use that as a kind of flour. And I thought that was great. I'll add one more that I'm really I'm loving what we're doing here. And that is we're using a very prolific byproduct of beer making. So beer, as you know, is made from grains, and usually a mix of barley, wheat, oats and whatever else they want to ferment. But there's only like a short time where the grain and water are in contact. And then it's that liquid that drains off that is used to make beer. But all those grains, which still are very nutritious, are leftover, and breweries throw it away. Actually, they pay to have it carted away. So they're very happy if we come to them and ask for this product. Because it saves them money from having the carrier come and get it. And they give it to us for free. And we're using it now in our pig program here to raise pigs. So the pigs love it. It's high fiber, it's high protein. And but I mean these things just seem like no brainers you know when you think of all the grain that Anheuser Busch must be throwing away from all the beer making that could make the life of pig farmer much make their life easier.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 13:27

Yeah, I remember you were so gracious and gave me and my daughter and daughter in law, a tour of your farm there and I saw them eating those pigs really did like that cream. That was really something they were very happy with that. I'd love to hear, you know, while you were at the White House, and you were recruited because of your recipes related to desert. I'd love to hear what you might have learned while you were at the White House that you've brought along the way since you left.

B

Bill Yosses 14:03

Yes, well, that was a very formative period for me to work with Mrs. Obama. I mean, the whole idea of planting a garden on the south lawn is just extraordinary. And so it was about 1400 square feet. One thing that was so amazing to me was how much food that plot of ground can produce and I know you're growing a garden there at UCLA now and I'm sure it's the same for the people that work with you and for yourself there how much food comes out of just a little

bit of soil. So that was I think one of the first things that I began to look at was not just this final product that comes into our kitchens. You know, as a chef, you pick up the phone and you maybe you do a little price comparison and of course quality comparison you want to get the best product for your customer. And then in the last couple decades, chefs are very much concerned about the source of their ingredients. So we look at things like the healthiness of, of even the soil where the product is grown, and even how the producer fits into his community. That's something that's very important, and which our customers are demanding to how that producer treats their employees, how they relate to the community. Is it a really exploitive enterprise? Or is it something which is beneficial to, to the people who are growing and harvesting the food? So all of those things have come into making a recipe now? I mean, and that's just the sourcing. The other thing that we look at is, as you mentioned, the subject of waste, like how can we use the most from our product, whether it be sort of this chaff of the pistachio nuts or finding something right, right now I'm making a sweet potato cake, and I save the skins, because that's where a lot of flavor and nutrition is. So I'm drying them out. And that's going to be sort of decoration on the cake, they they curl up when they dry into these sort of like crinkly little, I don't know, chiffon pieces. So that's going to be the decoration on the cake. Yeah, that's something that I probably would not have occurred to me before I worked at the White House with Mrs. Obama. And her whole thrust towards using quality ingredients. And using everything that you could, I mean, obviously, it's a very privileged position to have 1400 square feet, and to have some gardeners on staff to maintain the garden. But, you know, she, she asked us chefs to help with it. And I spent a great deal of time in that garden just weeding and harvesting. And it was, believe me, it's very easy to get volunteers at the White House, when you say, Oh, do you want to come into the White House grounds and help me weed? People aren't like, sure, yeah, I'll take off work for that. I'm sure it's not as easy in a lot of other situations. But that's what really showed me how, how fascinating growing food is. And the eye opener for me was I used to give tours to children. And so you'd have these middle schoolers or even younger, and they just found it fascinating that this, you know, this little sprout because we would have them plant the seeds. And then they would come back a few weeks later and see the sprout and or come back again and harvest whatever vegetable or fruit was growing, and just seemed miraculous to them not to open a plastic package from the supermarket and to actually see, lucky me to be able to have that experience and, and really see how things grow. And so that's what I do now is a continuation of that here at Stone barns.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:02

What a lovely way to describe the kind of work that you as a thoughtful chef can do in terms of integrating the whole food chain. When you look at that food that you're working with, right, you're thinking about where it came from, you know, even the farmer who might have started it all the way through to the end product. And I just feel like you know, my my experience with farmers and chefs and people who work with food, they have a much stronger respect for it in so many ways and and understand the labor and the love and the and the thought that goes into it. And that's something that would be a great gift to give so many people who might not have that opportunity to be in the role of of the food chain and so to speak. Now, your next chapter, you've really translated so much of your practice into education, not only for college students, but for elementary age students.

B

Bill Yosses 19:03

Yeah, no, I think and this is something so I'm not inventing any of this, like I had great mentors,

you know, Alice Waters in front in San Francisco and, or rather, Berkeley but she was a great inspiration to myself and many other chefs in in her efforts to really get people to be aware of where their food comes from. Obviously, Mrs. Obama a great influence on on this part of you know, introducing, all ages to growing foods. It is I feel like my mission and something I love is getting young minds and not so young minds to, to think about that and to enjoy this. It's a joyful experience to see things grow. And it has so much more meaning for what you cook and what you eat, when you're sort of a little bit informed about that. Delighted to see all the urban spaces that are turning into gardens, there's even a kind of agricultural tourism, I would call it that is becoming popular around the world. We see it here. There's always people of walking around our campus here and just enjoying the greenhouse or the vegetable field. Again, that project in Ghana, there's a wonderful man named Dr. Eric Dunkwa. He runs a center in Accra, which is called the West African center for crop improvement. And so and his acronym for it is wacky. I work at wacky, but he won a global food prize last year, for his work on that subject. And, and he too, he's, he's a very, he's a good advocate for a kind of agricultural tourism where people come and they begin to be aware of these incredible sources of food. So in Accra, the capital of Ghana, there is a market called macula. And as far as you can see these these farmers and salespeople that these merchants set up these food stands. You know, I've been cooking for many, many years. And I must have seen three or four dozen new products that I had never heard of never seen. Whether it was chilies or spices or vegetables. Just shows how vast this subject is and how you never get tired of really discovering new, new ingredients. It sounds like such a fun way to tour the world through the lens of it. That's that's the first thing I do. Now when I go to a new cities, I look up the market and go there.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 21:53

That is so cool. Speaking of Ghana, I know you're collaborating with a Children's Cancer Hospital in Ghana.

B

Bill Yosses 21:59

Yes, so so there's a brilliant pediatric oncologist, who is named Dr. Tanya Tripett, from Memorial Sloan Kettering, and I'll plug her program, which is called wish4life.org. And she has done an amazing job of marshalling a lot of efforts, a lot of people to bring awareness about this, the plight really of children in Africa, her success rate for childhood cancer cures in the States is about 85%. It's an enormous accomplishment. But the result in Africa is the opposite. Only about 15% of African children survived childhood cancer, the inequality of of care and of survival rates. Even in our own country, it's very much socially and economically determined. And this is so true in Africa, it's it's heartbreaking to see that. So how do you interact with that project? So my area of expertise is just cooking. And so actually, I've been on a long, I guess I would call it a listening tour, because bringing French pastries to Africa is not going to help. Thank you. I mean, maybe the hotels. But what I've done is I've partnered with some chefs there, and I've been learning about West African cuisine, and it's, it's an amazing culinary culture. So delicious. And I'm grateful to see how much is becoming more and more popular in the states now. So I've been learning about the ingredients, things like cocoa yam, which is a kind of a tuba. A lot of they use cassava quite often. And it's just an amazing culinary background. I'm sorry, I'm in a kitchen. So if it's a little noisy, we we have all the cooks are getting ready to have their lunch, I guess, that has been my role is really, I've been a student

more than a teacher. And hopefully with people like Dr. Dunkwa will be able to formulate a system where we can have fresh food grown in the region of the hospital and brought to the hospital to be cooked in the kitchen.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:26

Now, you just said you're not just a chef but of course we know food as medicine is a big thing these days and and you're taking action on that. And I love to know from your point of view, what is it that not just healthy food but local and culturally appropriate food? What does that bring?

B

Bill Yosses 24:47

Very good point. So there's always a balance in terms of cooking, and of you know how good it tastes. And as for chefs, we sort of assume right or wrong, that the better it tastes, the more nutritious it is, with very few exceptions. And so the thing about local is that you're, you're bypassing the storage phase, leafy vegetables, for example, they do suffer after they're stored for a long time. And the flavor, when you take it right out of the field, and cook it, of course, is much better. But we're not all living on a farm. So we have to, we have to find ways to sort of bridge that gap. And one of the ways to do that is by really looking at the genetics of the plants, and finding those plants that hold up longer in storage that hold up longer during transportation. And that's one of the things which is has been kind of bypassed with the food system that we have in America. So we've a long time ago sort of become distant from the people who are growing our food. And so longer and longer time periods elapsed between the harvest and the chefs using it. So one of the ways to get around that to improve that is by developing seed products, by studying the botany and finding out the plants that can retain their nutrition longer. But oddly enough, I mean, in our food system, that's kind of the last concern of what really is supplying our agriculture. One of the first concerns is volume. You know, the plant geneticists talking to the farmer talking to the grocer, they want to produce as much as they can, on as little land as they can. And then portability, or transferability, or transportation. To their credit, they're probably concerned about climate change, and how plants can adapt to climate. Unfortunately, that maybe number four is pest resistance. A lot of those kinds of products require a lot of fertilization, which is basically nitrogen. We know that this is finding its way into our food system and eventually into our bodies. Besides that, that nitrogen, as we all know, is running off into our waterways. So one of the things that we're focusing on is to find those seeds, which are which retain their nutrition over time and storage. The other is that by developing a system of healthy soils, we allow the immune system of the plant to defend itself. So that doesn't need pesticides, and fungicides and herbicides. When you think of the parallel with humans, and you're much more knowledgeable about this than I am, but we're seeing how antibiotics in the human population are sort of weakening our own immune system, because our immune system is sort of building up resistance to these antibodies. And it's sort of giving up because it's saying like, Whoa, you got this your antibiotics are working, I don't have to strengthen my own immune system. Plants have an immune system to so if you're doing all the work for them, their sort of immune system abandons the fight. And then when there is a pest that that you're not equipped to kill with a chemical, the plant cannot do it. But what we're finding is that when the soil is healthy, the plant is healthy. And that sometimes means actually stressing the plant a little bit, not giving it too much compost, not giving it too rich of a soil, letting that plant dig its roots deeper to find the

nutrients that it needs to defend itself. And as you saw when you were here in the greenhouse or in the field, these plants don't have spots and brown spots and insect and boll weevils and all of these things because they are defending themselves. And I don't want to paint too rosy of a picture because we do have failures. Not every time we do an experiment with a seed, does it come up, you know, looking like roses. But more and more through this very painstaking method. We're finding the plants which can really defend themselves and produce nutritious fruits and vegetables on their own.

**D** Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:48

When I first met you, Bill, I really saw and understood your integration of science into your work and you're just describing now a whole nother level that I wasn't aware of related to the actual seed itself in your life right now. What would you say, are the pillars or the mission that you're working on or are aspiring to work on?

**B** Bill Yosses 30:15

Well, education certainly of myself, because every day I turn a page and I'm seeing there's like a whole area that I know nothing about. And then sharing that not only the education, but just the joy of, of being in a kitchen and sharing time with other people cooking and sitting down to a meal. I had such great experience at UCLA with you, when we did some cooking at the church across the street there. And those to me, those are just the finest moments those are, that's worth it's worth a lot. Those are my best memories. And so discovering together what these these great ingredients are and learning about new ones and putting them into a pot and see what they taste like.

**D** Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:02

Yeah, you just brought back great memories. I agree. Cooking really builds community in so many ways. So for our listeners, who are college students or aspiring to a new career, what advice would you give those individuals in terms of venturing out into the food and culinary world?

**B** Bill Yosses 31:23

I'm so glad you brought up that that point, I really have great hopes for the future. We have a lot of college students who do internships, fellowships here, I'm amazed at how many people graduating from college or graduate school are interested in this subject. And at a very high level. And I was so as we mentioned, in the beginning, I was a French major. And so and I, I'm lucky enough to still have one of my French professors who still teaches, and he invites me sometimes to go talk to his class, it's a graduate class, on French literature, there must have been for, like PhD candidates focusing on food in Rabalais, or, you know, or Proust or, or one of these, like great French writers. And every year, it seems to be more. And it's wonderful, because I would never have thought of choosing that as a subject that I probably would have been rejected as, as a, you know, thesis candidate. But more and more people are finding food is really its own language. And it's one of our oldest languages. Nobody speaks Latin or ancient

Greek anymore, but we're still cooking the way they were cooking. In many ways. I see a lot of students with environmental planning, many of them are sort of studying city planning, or even architecture, and learning about how architecture can fit into either an urban environment or a rural environment, and be beneficial to the community, including the agricultural Park. So I just love seeing this as part of the way of going forward, it seems like we're really trying to bring ourselves back to what we know, is the source of our health. And that's the food that we grow like that a lot.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 33:24

And that example, it's more and more acceptable to include different subject matters into the humanities. And that's a great example that you gave when you're a guest lecturing. So we'd love to end our conversations with a question to all our guests, which is, what does it mean for you to live well?

B

Bill Yosses 33:46

Well, I'll go back to those, you know, as I, as the time goes by, I'm very interested in those blue zones. What I'll say besides, of course, they have great foods, you know, Mediterranean diet, all that. And I'm all in I love that stuff. I'm, I'm what I call a recovering pastry chef, because I really have tried to eliminate at least refined sugars as much as possible. So yes, diet, obviously. And I don't even like that word, because it sounds so clinical, but it just good food, I think is what I prefer to call it, and good food from a good source. That's living well. And what I learned from those BlueZone studies is it's not only the food that is keeping people well. It's two other things. One is community and connections to the people around them, whether that's family, friends, or even just people in the neighborhood. Really being part an integral part of your community is key to I think happiness living well. And finally, I would say maybe this is the most important and that is having a sense of purpose, you know, and it's more and more difficult in our society with. We're so browbeat with what is the meaning of success? And having the latest bag or, or, or for that matter going to the latest fancy restaurant. And we seem to be piling on this, you know, more is more mentality of, oh, I have to have 24 courses at a three star Michelin restaurant in order to eat well. No, thank you. I really think that, you know, is much more important than any of that or luxury products is having that sense of purpose and finding for ourselves what we can do to to make our lives meaningful.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 35:46

I love that. Thank you, Bill. You had a privilege and treat to speak with you today. I always love seeing your Wendy. Thank you for this opportunity and have a great afternoon. Thank you you too.

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36:21

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](mailto: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

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