

GUEST: PETER MERRIMAN

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What was the best thing you could cook at age fifteen?

The best thing I could cook at age fifteen. Well, I did learn to make eggs benedict when I was about fourteen years old, 'cause we had a contest. I was a Boy Scout, and they had a Camporee, so we had to make the best campfire meal you could. And I figured out how to do eggs benedict on a campfire, and that became my claim to fame for many years, that I had done eggs benedict on a campfire.

From cooking eggs benedict on a campfire, to incorporating local ingredients into his Hawaii restaurants, Peter Merriman is a culinary innovator. Not only has he used his talents to elevate local flavors, he credits Hawaii's many cultures as playing a crucial role in developing the menus in his restaurants and influencing what is now known as Hawaii Regional Cuisine. Peter Merriman, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Starting with his first restaurant in Waimea on Hawaii Island, and now on several islands under different names, Peter Merriman's restaurants feature locally-sourced ingredients and local flavors. It's his signature, recognizing our many culinary traditions. Growing up in Pennsylvania, Peter knew he wanted to be a chef from the time he

was young, but there was nothing in his experience or his career path that pointed toward Hawaii.

I was born just outside of Pittsburgh in a small mill town called McKeesport. And you know, I had a great childhood. I was a, you know, middleclass kid like everybody else, my father was a steelworker, my mother was a journalist. You know, it was just a idyllic 1960s American lifestyle.

And did you see yourself as going into the steel business like your dad?

No; no, I never wanted to go into the steel business. When I was in college, I actually worked in steel mills during the summer, and that was enough to convince me that I never wanted to work in the steel business.

You get good money, imagine, in the steel mills.

It was really good pay, and so, you know, you were really fortunate if you were a college kid and were able to get summer work in a mill. But it was real tough work. We had to wear, like, flameproof suits and helmets, and some of the areas we'd work in, we could only work for twenty minutes at a time because the heat was so incredible. But that convinced me that I didn't want to do that anyway. But I had kind of decided as a teenager that I wanted to be a cook. I had gotten exposed to Ferdinand Metz, a famous chef; I got to work for him a little bit. And I had always been interested in food, so I knew I wanted to be a chef. So, working in the steel mill was really a steppingstone to be able to afford some spending money in college, et cetera.

You said your mother was a journalist. She was a food writer.

Yeah.

So, that helped.

Yeah. Yeah; I mean, yeah, she was a great, great writer. And when I was very young, she worked for a smaller newspaper, the McKeesport Daily News, and she did sort of like women's columns. When I was in high school, she went to work for the Pittsburgh Post, which was a large newspaper in Pittsburgh. And she wrote about chefs, and she wrote about restaurants, about food quite a bit.

Did she only write about food, or was she a cook as well?

Well, she's a really good cook, but she's not a professional cook. And she would test her recipes. Actually, when I was young, I would test a few of her recipes for her; very simple things. But that was okay, because she was writing at that time for home cooks, so they could be real simple things. And that worked out real well, 'cause I always had a huge appetite.

[CHUCKLE]

So, I needed stuff to eat. And so, you know, she'd be on the phone in her office, telling me what to cook and how to cook it, and we'd see how it turned out. So, that was real fun.

Is that when you knew you wanted to be a professional, or did it come later?

No; I pretty much knew I wanted to be a professional from about the time I was, say, fifteen or sixteen years old. Sixteen was when I started working for Chef Metz, and I worked in restaurants as busboys and that sort of thing.

And in college, you were a popular guy on campus, because you could cook, and you did for groups.

Yeah; that's true. I lived in a large house with lots of people, and it was in Philadelphia. And every Saturday, we'd go to the Italian market and buy all fresh food, and bring it back, and I'd cook for fifteen, twenty, however many people. It was really fun. We called it Dinner Club.

And yet, when you went to the University of Pennsylvania, your major was political science.

Right.

How does that fit in?

Well, [CHUCKLE] I only got to go to Penn because I was an okay football player; right? I could never have gotten accepted into that school, except that I was a football player. And since I did get an offer to go to Penn, I wanted to be a cook, and I actually had applied to the Culinary Institute of America and been accepted. But when Penn offered me a chance to go there, I thought, well, I ought to just go to Penn first, and then I can go to the Culinary Institute of America later. So, that's how I ended up at Penn. And to this day, I'm a political buff; I just enjoy politics for fun. And so, it all worked out.

What happened after college?

Well, after college, I got offered a job to go work in New York City as a manager at the World Trade Center. And I also got offered a job to be an apprentice cook with the Rock Resorts. But the good thing was, the apprentice cook's job didn't start until late the next fall. So, I was able to go up to New York. Right from Penn, I went straight to New York, and I worked in the World Trade Center as a manager, and trained as a manager there, and then decided the management life wasn't for me; I preferred to be a cook. So, I went to Vermont, Woodstock, Vermont and became an apprentice chef for the Rock Resorts there; apprentice cook.

And I got paid minimum wage, and I often joke that I was the lowest paid Ivy League graduate the entire year. [CHUCKLE]

And I'm sure that's true. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] Yeah; and it was a great experience, you know. And I worked for another dynamic chef named Hans Schadler, a German chef who was very stringent, hard, and that was really good training, you know. He, as we say, kicked your butt every morning, and it made you understand the importance of being exact, and not wasting time, and getting things done in a proper fashion.

All right; so now, I'm trying to figure out how you got all the way to the Big Island of Hawaii, is it from Woodstock? Is that ...

No; I got to travel around a little bit. I was out in Wyoming for a little bit, I went to Martha's Vineyard. And I worked in Frankfurt, Germany. Hans Schadler actually got me a job at the Intercontinental Hotel, so I spent a little over a year in Germany working. I had come back; I was working at the Four Seasons in Washington, DC.

You were getting good jobs, weren't you?

Yeah, I don't know, I'm really lucky. [CHUCKLE] You know. In fact, in DC, I was very lucky, because I didn't like the job, and so, I had quit. I gave notice, and I quit right in early January. And I came home to my sister's apartment where I was staying at that time, and she was living there with her husband. And I said, you know, Hey, looks like I'm unemployed. And my brother-in-law, he's this tough guy from South Boston, and he goes, Yeah, yeah, yeah, you better get out there and start looking for work, man; we can't have any lazy bums around here. And within fifteen minutes, the phone rang, and it's Hans-Peter Schadler from the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel saying, Hey, would you like to come out here and be a cook? It took me like ten seconds to figure that out.

[CHUCKLE]

You know, D.C. in January to the Big Island of Hawaii. So, I was here the next week.

Chef Peter Merriman admits he knew almost nothing about Hawaii before he arrived. That didn't hold him back from immersing himself immediately into island culture.

Being on the East Coast in 1982 and 83, we had no idea what Hawaii was really like. I actually thought they might speak a different language out here.

And you were up for that?

Yeah; I was totally up for that, right? [CHUCKLE] And so, I came; I had one bag, and I had seventy-five dollars. And from the moment I touched down at Honolulu Airport and smelled those plumerias, I just said, Man, this is a cool place. And we landed at the old um, Kona Airport. Remember when they had just that one little place there, and they'd pull your luggage in by hand? And I'm going, Man, I can't believe this. You know, it was so great. And the chef, Hans-Peter Hager, he was the Mauna Lani chef, and he dropped me off at the Mauna Kea cooks' quarters. [CHUCKLE] You know, and everybody gets along, right? There's no problem. And so, I knew some of the cooks that were working at the Mauna Kea at that time. And so, they said, Well, you know, you can stay here, but we don't have any room, so you can sleep outside. So, I was able to sleep on the beach for about my first six weeks in Hawaii.

You were able to. So, that was a treat for you, right?

Yeah; I probably could have found a place to sleep inside, but I mean, I was going, Are you kidding me? You know, because I'd just come from cold weather and a year in Germany, you know. The fact that the cooks' quarters on this private little bay on the west coast of the Big Island, and I'm just going, Yeah, this is great, this is a dream.

So, at this point in your cooking career, are you known for a particular specialty? Is there something that had your touch specifically?

No; at that point, I'm a line cook. And in those days, there weren't quite as many resort hotels yet. So, there was like a small cadre of resort cooks who were like the top level that would travel around to the different resorts. And that's how I ended up here, really, was because Hans-Peter needed somebody, and one chef would call another chef that was in the resort business and just say, Hey, you know, I need a line cook. So, I was a line cook. And I loved being a line cook. You know, it's a young person's game, so I don't get to be on the line anymore.

Because you're juggling all kinds of things at once, at different temperatures and different cooking?

Absolutely. It's a lot like a sporting event too; right? You have to be really focused, very intense. You've got multiple things going on. And you're incredibly reliant on other people to do their job properly. Which is just like team sports. I think what I most liked about working at Mauna Lani was getting to know the local people in Hawaii. Because they were so great, you know, as everybody knows in Hawaii, and humble, and they had all this knowledge about food; food that I didn't understand at all. And the chef said, You know what, I want you to oversee the food that we're serving in the employee cafeteria. And a lot of cooks would have thought that was the low-line assignment. And I felt that was such a blessing that he did that for me, because that's where I learned local food. Because we were cooking for local people who

were working in the hotel. Things like, you know, chicken long rice; that was fantastic.

And you better not use non-sticky rice; right?

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] Yeah. Yeah; exactly. You know, and I think the first time I saw sticky rice pulling out of the steamer at the hotel, I'm going, Who ruined the rice?

[CHUCKLE]

You know, and everybody's laughing at me, you know, because there was so much to learn. And that was just a fantastic thing to have an opportunity to do that.

What were the kind of things that the employees wanted to be served in the cafeteria?

Oh, it was just straight ahead. I mean, I think Thursdays was lau lau, and shoyu chicken was on Friday. It was just right down to basics. And at the same time, I joined the Kawaihae Canoe Club. And that was great fun. And the other thing we'd do is, we'd have the potluck on Saturday after the regatta. And everybody would bring something, and I saw all these different, interesting dishes. And to me, at the time, the hotels were still doing continental cuisine; right? And I'm seeing sole almondine served in this very expensive hotel, and I'm going over to this canoe club and somebody's got beef broccoli, and somebody else has pork adobo. And I'm going. Whoa, there's stuff to be done over here. And so, for me, that was one of the first origins of Hawaii regional cuisine, was to see that there was really interesting stuff that just needed to be tweaked a little bit to be served in restaurants.

So, the inspiration was the canoe regatta potlucks.

Yeah, and all the interesting people, and everybody's coming from different ethnic backgrounds, and the way it all came together. Yeah, it was just great.

Isn't it interesting that you were given what you say was usually kind of a scrub job or low-line job, and yet, that turned out to be the breakthrough for you? And plus, you loved it.

Right; yeah. I know; it often happens that way.

And it was a breakthrough in vision, I guess I should say.

Yeah; I guess I was looking for different things, too. You know, because I had worked in Europe, and you know, I had seen fine cuisine, and that wasn't so interesting to me. It's more interesting for me to go into somebody's home, of whatever ethnicity, and see what Mama's cooking. You know, because so often, that's the clues to where great things start, is from what has been done in families for generations. There's often a lot of secrets that are hidden there. And I think if you look around the world and ask chefs what they're gonna do on vacation, they don't want to go to eat at three-star restaurants; they want to go to ethnic places around the world.

I guess there's a reason the stuff survives generations; right? You don't have to if you don't want to in your own home, so it's gotta be good.

That's exactly right. And often simple. And until recently, had to be affordable. You know, once, I had the opportunity to judge the Portuguese Bean Contest in Honokaa, and I went up to judge in it, and I got to talk with all the aunties after a while. And they were telling me that in the old days, there was very little meat in Portuguese bean. And I didn't know that. And this was like twenty years ago, they were telling me this. And they said, Yeah, yeah, we always put kale in there. 'Cause

everybody could grow kale, and it was really nutritious. You know, I thought, Man, that's really interesting. So, I 've been playing with kale in my Portuguese bean soup ever since, and now, like, kale's the rage. Everybody's eating kale, you know.

That's true.

So, they knew it in Honokaa way back then, twenty years ago.

[CHUCKLE]

Exactly; and what's old is new again.

Right; yeah. And it's nutritious, it can be grown in really poor soils. It's a great crop.

So, you said this was kind of the inkling of regional cuisine in your mind, you know, potlucks and home cooking, and ...

Yeah.

Employee dining room.

Yeah. When I was coming to Hawaii, I had a few days before I had to get on the airplane, so I went to the library, 'cause this was before computers. I went to the library, and I'm trying to figure out about the cuisine here. And I'm thinking, Man, it's gonna be this really interesting cuisine. And then, when I got there, and the hotels, all the hotels were doing this, were still stuck on this continental model, I was really disappointed, 'cause I wanted to see a cuisine which reflects society. I think that's the way cuisine should be. So, to find it in the employee cafeteria, or to find it at a potluck at a canoe club regatta was a great gift for me.

Peter Merriman's education about Hawaii's many local cuisines opened his eyes to untapped culinary possibilities. It wasn't long before he got an opportunity to test his new knowledge.

I left the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel. And the resort, the Mauna Lani Resort which is a sister company, they were building a steak and lobster restaurant. And I thought I was only gonna stay in Hawaii like a year or two. But I loved this place, right, and the people are great, the place is great, everything is wonderful. So, I had to stay. So, I figured, I'll just go up there and be the chef at this steak and lobster place. And when I was being interviewed for the job, the guy asked me what I thought at the time was a rhetorical question. And the interviewer said to me, you know, If you could do whatever you want, what would you do for the food there? And is said, Oh, I'd do regional cuisine; right? I was just like, young and cocky. And so, he called me up a couple days later and he said, you know, Hey, you got the job. And I'm going, Oh, that's great. And he said, We're gonna do that regional cuisine thing. And I said, Oh, my gosh. [CHUCKLE] It doesn't exist. So, that was the origins of it.

When you said regional cuisine, were you thinking farm-to-table, or what did that mean to you?

Well, it meant both farm-to-table, but it more importantly meant food that looked like the community it came from. Right? And the farm-to-table thing was really difficult, because I would guess the population on the Big Island then was about a hundred thousand people. There was not many people. So, almost all the food that was grown on the Big Island was meant to be shipped to Oahu or to the mainland. And so, it was hard for us to find locally produced items. So, we did a few things. I mean, the resort helped us plant a little herb garden in the back of The Gallery Restaurant. We would run ads in the newspaper saying, If you grow it, we'll buy it; we want local food, we want local items. And you know, little by little, people started to show up. Some people would

show up with free food. They'd say, Hey, I have a star fruit tree in my yard, and I can't do anything; here's a bag of star fruit, just have 'em, you know. [CHUCKLE] And it was fantastic.

So, you wanted to do farm-to-table when nobody was really doing it in a restaurant.

M-hm.

And to do that, you had to go talk to farmers.

We talked to farmers, we advertised, we grew our own. I would actually dive for sea urchin. Whatever it took. We called it guerilla purchasing, was the term we used for it. Because it just took every skill you had to figure out how to get something going.

'Cause it was on your menu, and you had to then find it; right?

Right.

Are there any other farmers that perhaps a word from you has helped, or the fact that you were in need of that sparked something?

Oh, man. There's a long list of farmers. But some of my favorite are Richard Ha at Hamakua Springs. I didn't even know Richard, and I'd only been at it a few years and living in Puako, and my phone rings Christmas morning. And I pick it up, and it's uh, it's Richard. He goes, Hey, you don't know me, but my name is Richard Ha, and I'd really like to thank you for what you're doing for the farmers. You know. And I'm like, tears in my eyes, you know.

So, you're on the Big Island, and you've decided to stay.

M-hm. I don't know what made me want to stay. I guess I decided to stay when I was just having so much fun, you know, hiking on Kohala Mountain, and paddling for Kawaihae Canoe Club. And then, I did meet my wife, and I think I met her in about 1985. And we didn't get married for a couple years after that, but yeah, that's probably what made me stay. But she would have left with me if I asked, but I didn't.

[CHUCKLE] You wanted to stay.

Yeah; this is just a great place. And you know, I've been fortunate to have lived quite a few other places, so I understood the value of what was going on in Hawaii.

I have asked a lot of people, Who started the farm-to-table movement? And almost everyone mentions you were the one who started it. Do you consider yourself a pioneer of it, or were you the first chef ever to do regional cuisine and farm-to-table here?

I believe I was the first. There may be somebody that I'm unaware of, maybe long before. I'm probably the first at least in this generation of chefs that came along to do regional cuisine. At the time we started doing it, there was nobody else doing it. And that was, I think, 1986.

It doesn't seem like a coincidence that you as the first one would have been located on a neighbor island, more agrarian, more agriculture possible?

You're right; you're exactly right. Throughout my career, for some reason, I always end up in the right place at the right time. And being a neighbor island chef, you don't get the publicity you might get on Oahu, but you do get to know farmers, and you're right there next to the farmers. And that was very much a blessing.

Okay; I'm noticing a trend here. You often say, this happened, but it was just accidental, or I was lucky. Really? How much of that is really accidental and lucky? I mean, you know, you were pursuing a plan.

I was pursuing a plan, but you know, if I'd have been born twenty years earlier or twenty years later, it wouldn't have happened to me. So, I always say, Hey, look, maybe I was good at taking advantage of the opportunities put in front of me, but they were put in front of me. And if it hadn't been me, it would have been somebody else. So, I think it is. I like to call it fortunate more than lucky. It's a slight difference there. I was very fortunate.

After working in a number of fine dining establishments, Peter Merriman decided it was time to open his own restaurant; a dream that required money, hard work, and good sampling of luck.

Of course, when you started Merriman's Restaurant in Waimea on the Big Island, you weren't lucky in the sense that it wasn't, Ta-da done!

I was kinda unlucky. [CHUCKLE] Yeah; it was really slow for a lot of years.

Why'd you stick with it?

I didn't have a choice. I had a partner on that thing, and he made me leverage my house. I had bought a house for a hundred and forty thousand dollars, which was a fortune; right? And we were totally broke, my wife and I, and we put everything into that restaurant. And, you know, there was no way of starting over. And so, we carried it on our back, really, for a number of years. And our big break was being in the New York Times. And it's the most incredible story. Here, this is luck. So, there was a famous food writer from the New York Times; his

name is Johnny Apple. Right? And so, I'm cooking lunch one day, and lunch is kinda over, and I'm in the back, literally washing pots. And a waitress comes in and says, Hey, there's this guy out here from the New York Times and he wants to talk to you. And I'm like, Oh, yeah, yeah, right.

[CHUCKLE]

It's always guys trying to get a—

I'm busy doing my pots. [CHUCKLE]

Exactly. [CHUCKLES] That's right. I figured it's a guy trying to get a free meal. And so, Ah, tell him I'm busy. You know. And she comes back in and says, Hey, you know, he's insisting that you go out and see him. So, I go out to see him, and he goes, Hey, I'm Johnny Apple. I'm like, Whoa, Johnny Apple? You know. And he goes, Yeah, we were just driving by and we were hungry, so we stopped in. I said, Wow, that's fantastic. And I said, Let me buy your lunch. He said, No way. And he said, If you buy my lunch, I'm not allowed to write about you. I said, Oh, you can pay double, if you like. [CHUCKLE] No; and then, Johnny Apple wrote about us in the New York Times, and it changed our world.

Well, what did he write about you?

Just that we were doing the local cuisine thing, you know, and that it was very provincial, and he really liked that. He'd got that. You know, our phone started ringing; people from New York. Literally, our slowest nights were like under forty people served in a single night; right? And our phone starts ringing; they says, Oh, we're gonna be there in thirty days and you have to get me in your restaurant, have to get me in there.

[CHUCKLE]

And we were so slow, I would answer the phone; right? [CHUCKLE] I mean, I'd go, I think I can squeeze you in, in thirty days. [CHUCKLE] So, that was what really changed everything for us.

Not only people from New York were coming; right? I mean, the word spread.

Yeah. I mean, once again, we kept being lucky, and then we ended up in—the LA Times liked us a lot, and the Chicago Tribune Herald liked us a lot.

Did the outsider writers have a favorite?

Well, you know, I think a lot of people learned to like us with the lamb, the Kahua Ranch lamb. And that lamb, we started buying way back in, I think, '86 from Monty Richards. I called him up. I didn't know him, and I called him up and I said, Hey, I heard you have lamb up there, and I'd like to buy some. He said, Great. You know. And he said, It's frozen and it comes like this. I said, Oh, no, no; I need fresh. And he said, Well, if you want fresh, you have to buy a whole animal. And I said, Okay. And we've been buying fresh animals from the Kahua Ranch ever since then. But what that meant for us was that we couldn't have one lamb dish every single day of the week. So, Monday might be leg, Tuesday might be chops, Wednesday is braised shoulder, and so forth. And to do this in a restaurant, you need a skilled culinary staff. And so, I think the skilled writers understood that to be able to do that, that's very much like Provence; right? And now, they call that snout-to-tail; right? [CHUCKLE] Yeah. We weren't calling it snout-to-tail; we were calling it trying to get it fresh. You know. So, I think that was the dish that really put us on the map. When we started our restaurant, it was a real tough go for us, and it was just really hard work for a number of years.

And when you say for us, who's us?

It was my wife and I. But I also say us, because the people that I had working with me, some of the people had worked with me at the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel, and then they had come up and worked with me at the Gallery Restaurant, and then they came up to my restaurant in Waimea. So, we had a group of people. I've been really fortunate that way, to have great people around me my entire career here in Hawaii. So, usually, I like to refer to we; it's the team that makes it happen. I get the credit, but it was really the team that did all the work.

With the help of his many mentors, Peter Merriman found a new direction in life that was far from the steel mills in Pennsylvania. And with his willingness to immerse himself into Hawaii's potluck gatherings, canoe clubs, and farm communities, he found a fresh and exciting way to serve Hawaii diners, and to present Hawaii to the world. Mahalo to Peter Merriman, now a Maui resident, for sharing his stories with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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I cook all the time. Even like, some friends, we just went to Sonoma and rented a house, and I was cooking the whole time. And they kept saying, Why are you cooking? And I said, I'm like a guitar player; I want to play it all the time. It's not that it's work for me, it's enjoyment.

And that is true 'til today?

To this day; yeah. Oh, I love to cook. And it's kinda like I jones it if I don't cook; right? I need to go cook something, 'cause I haven't cooked for a while. And I love challenges. Like a new product will show up, or we're having trouble with a certain dish in the restaurant, so I'll take it to my home kitchen and work it out, and then bring it back to the chefs, and tell them what I found. And then they take it from there.

[END]