

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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I'm a local boy from Hilo, most of the days I'm in surf shorts and slippahs and t-shirt and here I am, with these visitors. There was a visitor that came from um, from Calgary, into our restaurant, and visiting me in the middle of this ocean, just like the world-wide recognition of just being out there for doing something that I love.

Cooking has been his passion since small-kid-times, when he had to climb up on a chair to get next to the stovetop---so he could stir the saimin. Meet this award winning Maui chef, next on Long Story Short.

One-on-one, engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people. Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou, I'm Leslie Wilcox.

Island chef Sheldon Simeon grew up with a father who could laugh, make small talk and cook for everyone in their extended family at the same time. Sheldon brought that neighborhood, family feeling to the nation, when he appeared twice on the TV show Top Chef and was an audience favorite. Since then, he's owned his own restaurants and won numerous cooking honors.

Raised on the Big Island, Sheldon secured his first cooking job at age 16--at Pizza Hut. After graduating from Hilo High, he went on to culinary school on O'ahu and later settled in Maui. As a child, he says, it felt natural for him to help his father prepare food for hundreds of people, before he was tall enough to reach the top of the stove.

My family was always the cooking family. For baby lū'au's and graduation parties, and even our house, that was the gathering place, so...holidays were spent there and grandmas' birthdays were sung at our house and uh, there was always something, somebody over our house and we were always cooking.

How did that start?

Uh, well, my parents were amazing cooks, uh, I mean, family is everything to us, so we keep our, all our family very close and uh, yeah, my dad has always been, from when I was young, always the guy that would cook for these large parties, so...

It was your dad...and I think, I understand your mom was sick?

Yeah, my mom had a stroke when we were very young and so she stopped working for a little bit and my dad worked a lot. Uh, but...

When he worked a lot and your mom was not well, who cooked?

Me and my brother.

How old were you?

Yeah, oh man, I remember we would have to cook saimin with a chair by the stove when we'd be cooking for ourselves, but uh, he'd always give us instructions, like, go take out the meat from the freezer and make sure it's defrosted and you gotta cook something. So we were cooking, we were cooking full dinners by the time we're in elementary school, yeah.

Did you like it?

Uh, yeah, we loved...uh, maybe not noticeably loving it, we knew that that was something that we did, I guess, uh, like recognizing our love for, was uh, when I went into culinary school, I was like, ok, it comes natural to me, so...

And your brother went to culinary school, too.

Also went to culinary school, uh, both of us, I mean, I guess that was a perfect pathway from all our years of cooking.

What did you cook for your family when you were kids? Besides saimin?

Yeah, shoots, Filipino food. Alongside with uh, we grew up with our grandparents too, a lot at their house, so a lot of time spent in their yard, picking vegetables, and uh, cooking stuff like *pinakbet* which is like the Filipino vegetable stew, uh, just a lot of local food, just uh, soups and beef stew, and all of that.

Was there anything that you thought was too hard to cook, I can't do that?

Uh, no, we'd always, there's always a way to figure it out, I guess, I don't think that we ever looked at a recipe, or, we never even knew recipes, it was like, ok, that's how dad did it, let's do it.

Ah, so you figured out how, yeah, about how long to cook and turn down the heat and all that stuff?

Yeah, we were right alongside our parents the whole way, my...spoon in our mouth, tasting from a very young age, understanding all of that. we'd cook for these large, you know, in Hawaii, we celebrate, when we do graduation parties and first birthdays, it's this big celebration, so, cooking for parties of 300, 400, was normal for us. And then, my dad had all of these woks, these big [INDISTINCT] from uh, handed down from my grandfather, that we've always cooked out of. So, as we got older and taller, the spoon became shorter, but I remember stirring the pot when we were like, like this.

I would have trouble figuring out how much stuff do you need to cook for 300. I wouldn't have any idea, but do you...you have a sense of what that...how much that is?

Right, just uh, I don't know, it just became natural, my dad's and my parents, uh, my family has been doing it for so long that it's like always...ok, this is what it is and everyone's around doing what needs to be done.

Who's doing the dishes?

There's a lot of that going on, too, that's equally uh, a responsibility.

You've always been competitive, not just in food, in cooking?

Yeah, always been competitive. Did karate for most of our young life, uh, growing up, volleyball and played music, and did all that stuff, so always involved in doing stuff. But uh, but it was always me and my brother, if I think about it, we were always cooking, always doing something, had a very strict household. Dad was always working, so we'd always have to do a lot of chores around the house and uh, make sure that everything was done.

Hilo High, what happens after Hilo High?

Uh, Hilo High, I go to, move to here, to Waipahu, to live with my auntie, and uh, Leeward Community College, their culinary program there. Uh, did an internship at Walt Disney World, halfway through, where I met a Maui girl.

Okay, how did you meet?

We met at the bus stop, which was weird because she stayed late that for her shift and I was sent...I went home early...

You're both local, young people working on the mainland...

Yeah...working in, in...

In Florida...

In Orlando, you know, you just like, hey...you kind of recognize each other that you are from Hawaii, so yeah, she...

Who spoke first?

Uh, she did. She said, are you from Hawaii? She kind of invited herself over to, to my place. So I lived in the new complex and she wanted to check the place out and uh, luckily for her, it was a few days after Valentine's, me and a couple of the other Hawaii boys decided to cook local food for all the girls in the complex and I had some leftover chicken long rice to feed Janice, and uh, I guess, love at first bite? I don't know.

So, did you go back to Leeward Community College when you met the Maui girl?

So, we turned back for one semester of uh, at Leeward and then moved to Maui.

Wow, and now children?

Now four children later and the restaurants together.

Wow, that's quite the bus stop meeting.

Yes, yes, I went to Disney to meet my princess and she got to meet her Prince Charming, there you go.

Sheldon Simeon found work in a restaurant on Maui as an entry-level dishwasher. From there, he worked his way up until his talents started drawing national attention, including from producers at Bravo TV. They invited him to compete on Top Chef.

This is your third island that you're living on, because you're from Hilo to O'ahu, now Maui where your wife lives, what's the plan once you get to Maui?

I was actually going to school in Leeward and I was visiting my wife at that time and I wanted to go eat at a local food spot and uh, we visited Aloha Mixed Plate in Lahaina, and prior to that, jokingly, if I could...I joked with my wife, ok, if I could find a job, ok, I'll move to Maui. And I had a friend from high school working at Aloha Mixed Plate, asked for a job, he said, let me get the chef. Did an interview on the spot and uh, he said, when can you start? I said, I'll be back in a week. I packed my stuff up and uh, started, yeah, that was my life on Maui, so that's where it started.

Did you start as a chef?

Started as a dish washer prep cook. Young...enrolled at Maui Community College, start that job, found a small apartment and just be stoked on that. And then I stayed with that company for ten years and they gave me a lot of opportunity. Work my way up from uh, from a dishwasher to chef.

And did you like it as you went along? Because at any given point, you could say, ah, I think I'll get off here.

Yeah, and that's what's amazing about our profession is that there's so many different parts and just constantly learning.

Well, how did you get national attention? How did that start happening?

Oh man. I don't know. I've always just been a type of person to just put my head down and work and...started to get recognized for, I guess, the hard work. Um, it started off at Star Noodle, where we had an amazing team of people that wanted to do like a New York style noodle shop out there in Maui. It was part of the company that I was with, Aloha Mixed Plate, in Old Lahaina Luau. So, we were opening up a new restaurant and they gave me the opportunity to be a chef, and that was like my first real, actually, exec-chef job.

And what do you think you brought to it that another chef would not have? What was the distinction in your case?

I really think I put a local lens on it. I really, uh, use my local upbringing as an inspiration and tried to put storytelling into every dish of things that inspired that dish and really go into the history of the dishes and uh, yeah, I was just very meticulous on everything. I just worked with the team to make sure that everything was always executed as the best that we could.

But always local, with something that...

Yeah, with a twist...

That made it stand out from my uncle's house, for example...

Exactly, always using the best ingredients, using some techniques that we might've seen or we learned along the way in our career and uh, applying it to that. When we opened...when we opened up Star Noodle it was like, noodles was the hottest trend. It was like, Momofuku and all the noodle bars in New York was everything. And we knew that that was...locals love noodles, so it was a easy restaurant to transition for these locals to come and enjoy.

When you can cook local food here, it's a range of cultures. You know? I mean, you've covered a lot of ground, it's not like you're closed to the world.

Right, right, right, it's uh, we get to pick and choose, so that's what's amazing about Hawaii food is that, you crazy if you think it's going to be boring because I might be Filipino but uh, Korean flavors, Chinese flavors, Portuguese flavors are all part of my...uh, part of being me.

It seems like the people who really get places are celebrity chefs, but that's on top of cooking.

Yeah, exactly, this industry started for individuals who are more introverts, right? We could be in the back, just doing our thing, and but now it's about being out there and putting yourself out there, that's part of being successful, so...

I'm sure that, uh, Top Chef competition two times was extremely time consuming and probably occupied every molecule of your brain, right?

Oh yeah, yeah, so you'd sacrifice uh, but, at that time, it was like seven weeks of your time with no, no uh, type of way to get to the outside world, there's no communication with the wife or your businesses, you're just right there, all in there.

And what was it like being with the other chefs and the rules?

It's fun. The first, the first time around. I'm fortunate I got to do the two, got a second try, so that uh, but the camera's always in there, always there, and that's hard to get used to, and then, we're out there sacrificing being away from our loved ones and we all want to win, so it's competition.

Do people do bad things like steal ingredients and you know...dirty tricks?

Yeah, there's definitely a little bit of that going on in between, but for the most part, we try to just showcase our skills and we all understand it's already difficult as it is, we don't need to be like, doing that, but uh, there's some tricks that get you ahead for sure.

But you didn't do, right?

Uh, maybe not on camera.

Oh, that's the other thing, the camera never blinks...and then, that's an interesting, you know, it's a collegial feel but you're all in competition so it...it must be unsettling.

Yeah, knowing that uh...

You can't relax.

Right, because it's just a constant that your mind is always thinking about the competition, but uh, you get close to those people because it's such an intense moment of your life that only a certain handful of people understand, will ever understand it, so you get close with those guys. Uh, it was weird, it's weird to go through that process, especially going back to my wife, who, we share everything, right? Then, here it is, a moment in your life that is so significant and not done with her, so...it is, it's still a weird dynamic to think about it.

To be on Top Chef, I'd bet you have to be...communicative and vocal and interesting...

Yeah, it's definitely a part of my life that I've had to learn, uh...

Really? You weren't always like this? So you're affable, friendly, you're...relaxed?

No...yeah, I think...oh, man, I was a mess. If you watch my early videos from it, the...I was definitely nervous, um, we get comfortable, I put the same effort into like, learning this side of it as part of being a chef, so I was like, ok, you better get comfortable doing this.

How would you have spoken before if you hadn't put effort into the, you know, being a personality?

Yeah, I would uh...I still have trouble finishing my sentences and all of that, but uh, it's still...just...the more you do it, the more comfortable you get. Before, I was always intimidated, especially when I would see someone going up or...I'd always put myself and...I'd always uh, look at somebody else and like, man, I wish I could do that, I'd always...so...oh man, thinking about...putting me back into the moment, I'm nervous again, see, this is just how it is...

Well, I think about that and when you cook with family and friends, you don't really have to say much. You just enjoy, right? But when you're facing an audience, as you did on network TV, you have to explain what you're doing and you have to relate to your, you know, fellow competitors...

Exactly...well, I always, in the back of my mind, is like, ok, this is your moment, you were put here for a reason, like, capture it, here's your moment to share what you love and what you do, so if you just speaking...again, same thing with cooking, speak from the heart, it'll come out and it will show.

When you were on Top Chef, you decided not to go with your roots and you decided to do something different with quail, I think it was.

Yeah.

So, and that didn't work out the way you intended.

Right, well and uh, for that whole season, I was just like...I was thinking that, ok, one-trick pony, you know, that's the food that I cook is only one, this one step, this one thing, and uh, you know, it's a competition, it's the first time being out in front of everyone and putting yourself on the line, you start to think of, what do I need to be to move forward, and I thought it was like, ok, branching out, doing something different, and in the end, it wasn't it...I'm glad, I'm thankful for the time did, had that moment to go out and explore and try new things, but uh, it was a good lesson. As always, just be yourself and that's it, that always shines through.

Sheldon Simeon didn't win Top Chef, but he did win Fan Fave both times. Since then, he has received local and national recognition, including earning semifinalist honors for the prestigious James Beard Foundation's Best New Restaurant Award—that was for his Wailea restaurant, Lineage. Yet, in early 2020, with his career on fire, Sheldon Simeon made a heart-wrenching decision to take a step back.

The very thing that inspired me about Lineage was family. Speaking about my family, talking about our family traditions, the things that I did growing up with my father and my grandfather, and preaching that to public and to media, and here I am, being a hypocrite, not even spending time with my own family. So...

Because it was so intensive of an experience?

Yeah, so constantly being there. To a point where it was like uh, yeah, it was eating me up inside, so I decided to go to...restaurants or family and family won. Family always wins.

What was that...how did that decision feel like when you made it?

Well, leading up to it was probably like the most difficult decision, especially when something that we love and what we do, right? That...restaurants has been my life for 20 years, it's all I know, and I...had a lot of great experiences through it...that threw my whole life into it, and uh, yeah, making that decision to walk away was tough, but now, after looking back on it, uh, I've never been happier in my life.

What did you gain by losing the restaurant?

Time with my kids. Communicating. I got to go chaperone my first field trip last week. You know how rad that is? Those moments, uh, riding bikes around the neighborhood with my, my kids. Laughing at the table...a lot of times before was just, hi dad, or just single-word communication, or, dad can you pick me up, or, I need this...now they can't wait to tell me what happened at school, or what's going on, and we laugh and we do Tik-Tok videos and it's, it's, starting, I don't know, trying to get back all these years that I missed.

Yeah, because you've been, like you said, throwing yourself into work, but on the other hand, a chef, that is a chef's life, it's very hard to have a...I mean, a full-time schedule is like a part-time job for a chef because you're always working over and on holidays, and when everybody else is celebrating, you're working...

Yeah, that's a lot of years of sacrifice, and it's...to the point where my kids wasn't even expecting me to be around during holidays or, or being at their, their uh, cheerleading competition or anything like that, so I was like, I need to change this. They're at their prime years and I'm still young. I know I can open up more restaurants in the future, but I'll never get these years back.

To do what you needed to do was extremely hard and it took a while, you had to...

Yeah...I went to a point of depression for a while, I'm not gonna lie, it was tough. It was...that's all I knew. Even more than, even more than being a dad, I knew being a chef first before anything and that was natural to...to look at it as not being a failure of walking away from it, as it just being, ok, I'm...to be happy and become a father instead of like, we're walking away from it. I've seen the change in them in this last few months, the way that we communicate and sometimes I have an out-of-body experience as I'm talking with them and I get emotional just seeing that, whoa, I'm actually having a conversation with my kids and uh, it's...it's uh, yeah, it's real.

When you make local food, you make it rise above all the other good local cooks...do you do something surprising? Or more of something? How do you stand out?

I think it always starts off with your sourcing, knowing that you're using the best ingredients, you know? Very close with farmers, knowing where that vegetable was grown, what type of care was in that, uh, you get to play with, we play with fun gadgets, so to say, Vitamixes and 30,000 dollar ovens that have special cooking uh, settings...and uh, just being meticulous on every single step of preparation, perfect knife cuts, uh, perfect uh, marinating or cooking of it, whatever it be, just like always at every single step, taking the most care about it.

So you can't be distracted, even though it's a chaotic situation in a kitchen...

Exactly, you caring about this ingredient that uh, that was...whether it was butchered or it was harvested, that was a lot of work that got to that point, so you want to be very respectful and see it to the end.

You know, I heard that you have this really good kimchee dip, so I thought, oh good, I can make that, that sounds easy, then I heard how you make it and I'm thinking, no way, would you explain how you do it?

Yeah, well, the kimchee, it in itself, it takes, you know, it takes over a week to get it to the point, uh, yeah, be fermented properly, then we whip the...we make the crème

fraiche, and we make sour cream from scratch and we fold into an aioli, but uh, it's all fancy. If you take...

Don't you freeze dry it or something, too? Something...

Yeah, we, we, we dehydrate kimchee and then turn it into a powder and mix it with uh, fried garlic to powder the top of it. Believe me, I'm very happy with buying store-bought kimchee and Best Food Mayonnaise and putting it together, I'm happy with that, but uh, it's cool to take inspiration from something so simple that we grew up eating and then dive into it and apply all these different techniques to it.

You have to cook with your heart, but how does that translate into the taste of food?

It...I've been still trying to figure it out for years. I've been learning my dad's recipes for so long. It's like, I cooked the same thing as he did, and I bet you if we had to cook side-by-side, like, when if he stirs and I stir, when he add salt, I'll add salt, in the end, you tastes his one, it'll taste better. It's just all these years. He always exudes that, that love into your food. It's just care. I think a lot of times when you've asked people, what's your death-row meal, if you had one last dish to taste, it's usually something that's very simple, that's comes from memory, that's from a family member, whether it's your grandmother or your mother, and it's always something that it's not, never some crazy Michelin star restaurant or whatever, food, it's always something that comes from the heart.

At the time of this conversation in February of 2020, Sheldon Simeon and his wife Janice had put their retirement savings into buying a small, lunch only, take-out only restaurant in Kahului. When the pandemic hit they adjusted the restaurant hours and staff size to account for business ups and downs.

Mahalo to Sheldon Simeon of Kahului, Maui, for sharing his stories with us, and thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

Who are your favorite chefs?

Well, favorite chef of all time is still my dad, hands-down. Dad cooks uh, he has a way to make food, no matter what he cooks, he makes people happy and that's ultimately all that happens. That is the most important thing, to make some people enjoy your food. The local chefs, the old school HRC guys, has always been my heroes, so, Chef Peter Merriman, Chef Roy Yamaguchi, Sam Choy, all those guys paved the way for us. Chef Tom Colicchio from Top Chef judge, Chef Emeril Lagasse has been an amazing

mentor and always has great words to encourage you along, see how things are going, uh, opportunity to meet Gordan Ramsay...

You're going to tell me he's a nice guy, right?

Yeah, he is. Maybe he should stick to not cooking Spam again, but yeah.

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