

The logo for 'LIFE at Disney' is centered within a dark, rounded rectangular box. The word 'LIFE' is in a clean, white, sans-serif font. 'at' is in a smaller, lowercase, white, sans-serif font. 'Disney' is in the iconic white script font. The background of the entire page is a colorful mosaic of small squares in shades of red, orange, yellow, and green.

LIFE at Disney

Episode 5 Transcript: Disney Culinary – Signature Dining and Festivals

Ashley and Tony (Podcasts Hosts)

Welcome to the Disney podcast, the show where you discover what it's like to be part of the story and a career with Disney as we bring the Walt Disney Company's core values, culture, and work to life. We're your host, Tony Williams and Ashley Siegel, and we are going to share some remarkable stories from the perspectives of the people and the teams behind the magic.

Ashley

The Culinary team at Disney Parks and Resorts creates unforgettable dining experiences for guests from around the world. To kick off this week's show, we are sitting down with the Culinary Director of Signature Restaurants at Disneyland Resort's Napa Rose & Carthay Circle, 21 Royal, and Club 33 restaurants, and the Grand California's Pastries Shop. For more than a decade Disney's Grand Californian Hotel & Spa has been known for its innovative cuisine, making it a must-do on your Disneyland list. Let's welcome to the show, Chef Andrew Sutton.

Chef Sutton

Hey, how are you guys?

Ashley

So glad that you're here with us today.

Chef Sutton

No, I'm so happy to be here to share.

Ashley

So, have you always wanted to be a chef? Tell us a little bit about your culinary journey. How does one end up where you are today?

Chef Sutton

So, I actually was a swimmer at TCU and working and going to college and came out for a summer job and just fell in love with the athleticism, the artistry, the tactile performance of being a chef. And then I built a career doing all aspects from pastries to banquets to fine dining to casual dining all the way along the line at some of the finest restaurants in America. Those being Mansion on Turtle Creek, Auberge de Soleil. And then eventually was recruited by Disney to come down and open up Napa Rose Restaurant, which is in the Grand California Hotel.

Ashley

That's incredible. It must be an amazing job that you're doing. And so, what is that like overseeing all of the teams that are really bringing Disney's signature dining experiences to life?

Chef Sutton

It's an honor and a pleasure. So, we've had so much fun. We opened up Napa Rose in 2001 and immediately got incredible accolades. We were number two in the state behind the French Laundry and just performed wonderfully. And we're able to build the teams and it's been really exciting because we got more opportunities opening up Carthay Circle and then reopening Club 33 and then opening 21 Royal. So, people have been able to continue their careers as well as my own. So, our team now most of the guys have been with me 10 to 20 years. You know, we have this incredible relationship and intellect as far as the chefs go, and then we're always just developing new talent and promoting them out and into the resort.

Ashley

That's incredible. So, you're really working with everybody from our culinary program, right? Our college-age students that early career all the way through these executive chefs. So, what's your favorite part of getting to work with all these different people on these different teams?

Chef Sutton

Really is the mentorship to see somebody just smile and get an understanding of how to really do fine dining, to be that perfectionist to develop those cooks. We've done dishwashers, we've done people from the industry. We really put the polish on people who love excellence. So not every restaurant you know is at the high standard. And not everybody wants to be that, nor do they have to be. But the teams have just been crazy, even in the pastry department. I have to say, they have a program that is just outstanding. They make these grand displays in the showroom, or the lobby of the Grand California Hotel, which might be a haunted house or an Oogie Boogie. And then they'll go all the way down to plated the desserts, to cakes, to wedding cakes, and you just don't see that even the refined desserts. And so, working with that team is, you know, just to watch them and

the passion that they feel and the way we're able to service guests, it's personal. And that I think part is really, really exciting.

Ashley

I think that's so magical, right? There's so many options for people when they're coming to our resorts. And so, to be able to come and have such elevated fine dining experiences with your teams at these restaurants and especially at the pastry shop, I think that that's such a cool part of Disney that people may not be aware of. Were you always aware of the elevated dining here at Disney or was it something that was new to you when you were recruited?

Chef Sutton

It's super new to me. You know, I didn't know they have some incredible restaurants at Disney World, but they really didn't have them until we kind of came on board. So, they created a team of us and put us together, opened up Napa Rose. And it is so fun. I mean, we do we change our menus constantly working with organic and local ingredients. The support of Disney has been outstanding. We have an open kitchen. So, you see the guests. We've been able to watch people grow up. We're doing multi-course meals where it's layered perfectly paired with wines on the front-of-the-house side. The majority of our front-of-the-house team is certified, sommeliers and cicero's, which is pretty incredible. And I would say 50% of the cooks are as well. So, they've been able to take advantage some of the training that Disney offers.

Ashley

That's really incredible. And thinking about really the wide range of our signature dining opportunities. What's your favorite type of cuisine? Either to work with or to oversee?

Chef Sutton

So, at this point in my career, I don't really have a favorite. There's sort of like my children, all of them have different attributes and different things. With Napa Rose, we really concentrate on an art direction of being wine country cuisine. So, I worked in Napa Valley for many years at the Auberge du Soleil and scored great accolades there. Brought that system with us at Carthay. It has two floors, so it's a beautiful restaurant outside curbside dining, fresh, light, L.A. style, where maybe the animators would hang out after work. And then upstairs a break from the weather and just an elevated style of dining up there as well. And kind of this beautiful, Carthay Circle is where Walt actually aired the seven dwarfs, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. So that was kind of an icon in the history of the development of the company. So, it's just this beautiful, wonderful restaurant. And then 21 Royal, oh my gosh, it's the creme de la creme. It's a pinnacle of performance. It's in Walt's old apartment in Disneyland. No one knows where it is. You can't find it. You can't see it.

It's super exclusive. And that's kind of the playground for chefs for sure, where they really can do their, you know, match their best skills.

Ashley

That's just incredible. It's so cool to hear about that wide range that's available. I assume day to day you're not sitting here having conversations with people like me. So, what does your day-to-day responsibility look like? What's a day in the life of Chef Sutton?

Chef Sutton

It's a lot of miles. Let me just tell you, it's a lot of walking around. It's really fun. So, I'll come in and work with the pastry team just talk to them, in fact, on the way in and then start off. You know, we'll get the menus in order. Look at the specials coming up for the work week, work with the chef teams. I'll spend some time with the Napa chefs today getting ready for the specials that we'll drop in, and then I'll take a walk over to Carthay and then a walk to Club, and then I'll come back and watch the food going up, making sure everything just tastes great, work the service with the team, and then I'll rotate. Saturday I'll be at 21 Royal and the Club team and spend some time and it's really nice for me to get that side by side working together with the team. A lot of culinary directors may not do that, but I love it. That's my passion. I love every aspect of being a chef, you know even the paperwork, I think it's all good, but working with the cooks is probably the best.

Ashley

Yeah, that was going to be my next question. Favorite part of the job. So really getting in there and being in the kitchen with, with your teams, huh?

Chef Sutton

Oh, it's exciting. You know, when you create something or if you teach somebody how to do a perfect sear on a scallop in what the nicest flavors, seasonal flavors, and it's just constant reinvention. You know, it's fun. It keeps your creative mind. You're alive, you're working it's a passion, it's a skill, its objective, it's subjective. You know, it's a lot it's really fun.

Ashley

And you're probably seeing, you know, our guests really lighting up they're used to seeing and they're expecting to see the magic in the parks and in the hotels. But then to have them come into your restaurant and really get to see the magic that your chefs are bringing out and serving to them, that must be a really special experience.

Chef Sutton

It's been incredible. The guests vary and literally at Disneyland 40% of the guests are locals. So, they come in because they love us. It's not just the guests coming from outside, but it could be, you know, grandma and grandpa taking out the whole family and sharing

the finer things in life. It could be, you know, partners that have finally got an escape from the kids and they get to have their date night again and an eat ticket ride in their own way as an adult. It can be foodies who are just wanting to have that experience of food and wine pairing and what it can mean and what delicious really can be. We even have guests who come down and they say, gosh, I hate this item, but I want to try it with you. And then if I don't like it, then I know I really don't like it. Like say mushrooms, you might say, oh, gosh, you know, and all a sudden they're like, okay, we're going to do mushroom.

Ashley

You really know how to put that spin on it to make sure.

Chef Sutton

It's probably the wrong vegetable to pick. Right. But it could be anywhere.

Ashley

That's so cool and so you know, you talked about opening a lot of these different restaurants. What really has been a highlight for you and your career here at Disney?

Chef Sutton

Oh, golly. You know, the handcrafting of the food, the really supporting. I mean, we really have won some incredible awards, best restaurant in a theme park in the nation. We've had some incredible awards for the chefs even of those restaurants are winning awards. It's not all about me. We give back to the community, Illuminations Foundation and Alex's Lemonade, which is a cancer research for children. I mean, it's really just the full breadth of the job and the way that we approach what we do. It's kindness and it's execution, and it's pretty exciting. And the teams are just nice. You know, we have a together for a while. So, it's not, you know, you really build a family.

Ashley

That's incredible. And must be such meaningful work. It sounds really, really special.

Chef Sutton

I think so.

Ashley

Thinking about your teams, like you mentioned, they're such a family feel. So how are you fostering that culture within your teams or the development of these folks, how they come in? What does that look like when you're working with the team?

Chef Sutton

So, it's very interesting. In our restaurants, the candidate comes in, they interview, and then they have to do a tryout where they physically come and cook so we can place them where they might fit the best. So, at every single one of the restaurants and as they try out, so we get to know them and they get to know us before they ever take the job, they get to see what the job is all about it. It's kind of really cool. It's called the stage, and I wish more professions did it. I mean, it's they get a good knowledge and then as they come in, it's just that piece of like care for one another. It's not, not competitive against the other people on the team, but it's creating that magic for the guest and really having them as the first focus and then partnering with the front of the house team, the waiters, the managers, that one plus one equals three kind of combination that makes, you know, something special in somebody's lives. When you see somebody having this special experience, when you are a part of that, it's pretty cool.

Ashley

Any favorite stories of casts that have come in to work with you?

Chef Sutton

Oh my gosh, there's so many wonderful people. This was kind of a fun one. We had a gentleman whose name was Juan, one of our dishwashers, and he showed some incredible promise, and we were doing an outside caterer event and just performed that exceptional rate and had an aptitude that was sort of exciting but brought him into Napa Rose and was able to develop his skills through the stations. And now he's a sous chef actually over at Carthay. So, he's went, you know, the full gamut. And then the food that he creates and the way he manages his team it's just really, you know, we keep using the word incredible, but it's interesting to see how well he is performing. And, you know, for him, he just like, oh, I don't know if I want to cook or not. And all of a sudden, he found out he was really, really good at it and was able to create something very special.

Ashley

That's fantastic. And who better, right, to be overseeing those teams than someone who really understands that full lifecycle. So, what a great story that is.

Chef Sutton

Oh, it's been, yeah, I was a dishwasher, so I got to do it myself. And I did go to culinary school and all that. So, I have lots to share from, you know, the science behind, but also then the artistic pieces of it.

Ashley

Absolutely. So, what skills do you look for in cast when you're looking to move them from maybe the roles within the kitchen or within the front of house and then into that leadership type of role? How does that work?

Chef Sutton

So fine dining is a craft for sure. And there's a ton of skills. It's pan skills, knife skills. You know how one sets oneself up, *mise en place*, we call it, you know, and the way somebody carries themselves. So, they have to go through the ability to perform at the highest level. One of the major skills is how someone takes feedback, which sounds kind of funny. I certainly look for kindness and intelligence because you can't train kindness or intelligence, but you certainly can foster it and build it up. And once somebody has, you know, the backing of the skills and can support, they're going to gain the respect of the teams. They're going to be able to help people be successful. They're going to be able to help other people develop and motivate. And then then we start to really work together as a full team and that's when somebody becomes a leader because they just, you know, they have it they have it going on and they're going to give people the right skills and ability.

Ashley

You know what you said about feedback specifically that is something that it feels like regardless of what industry you're in and what work that you're doing, that ability to be able to get and give feedback is just so important to really be able to grow in any role that you may be. So, I love that call out.

Chef Sutton

Oh, for sure. Yeah. I think it's really cool. And when somebody hear something, you know, that's how you get better, right? For sure.

Ashley

So, one of the really unique things about being a chef at Disney, it means you have everything else happening around the company. So how do things like new movie releases or different parts of the park opening up, how does that impact your work with things like new immersive lands, when we think about *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* or *Avengers Campus*, how does that impact your work?

Chef Sutton

Every day is a new day, gets to be real creative. So, you know, being so close to Hollywood, we get a lot of their releases. So, you know, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, too, and we'll do late night parties for them, and you have the finest guests in the world coming through and the A-list celebrities and all that. And we respect that with the utmost care and concern. And it's fun but we keep it real, you know. And so that piece is always exciting. They might release a new movie. And you know the next thing you know, we're not researching

shawarma or, you know, *The Princess and the Frog*, and we're trying to understand New Orleans cuisine, and they really find the appropriate restaurant to go to. But food is culture and culture is life and life is a story. And I think that's one thing that Disney does better than anybody is they kind of create that whole synergy of how it kind of comes together. And it can be from any land in the world, you know, and it's pretty cool. So, to be able to share on that is exciting.

Ashley

I love that because you really are kind of elevating that storytelling that we're telling through every part of somebody's experience when they're coming to Disneyland. So how does your team develop and work with the new concept teams when we are developing these new lands and they're developing new food concepts for the different immersive experiences?

Chef Sutton

So, in the hotels, we really perform a little bit insulated from the way the parks are developing. We're trying to provide that sanctuary, where people go after they've spent a day in the park. So, it really is about that setting. However, in pastries they literally work with the teams, and you know, if they're designing a Wookiee cookie, they, you know, the color matters, the artistry matters, you know, and it really is a synergy with even the trademarking teams to understand what can be used and what can't be used. And it's fascinating. It really is fascinating to be able to share in that whole piece.

Ashley

I love that and I'm sure the guests notice. So those details really matter. So that's just incredible how you're really getting to work across the company.

Chef Sutton

Oh, I tell you what, you know, a new ride and you'll find somebody who is an avid fan of almost anything, right? So, it's pretty cool

Ashley

For sure. How do you and your teams continue to innovate and elevate food and beverage in your role? So, you know, you've been here for 20 years. What is next? How do you keep that innovation alive?

Chef Sutton

Well, it's really driven by the product. So, every single season is brand new and when you know you're looking forward to the next season, it's opportunity. So, keeping ones self-polished, incredible amounts of research, always being current, you know, understanding, but we never take just trends, you know, like the micro trends they kind of come and go. I

prefer the macro trends looking at the direction of palate, the direction of color, you know, it can be is even watching what people are buying and colors of cars and, you know, large investment things. But then boiling all of that down to create something special. My mind's kind of a bit of a collage. It's got a whole lot going on. We have, you know, cooking techniques from Japan and Korea and Italy and France and America. And when you get that inspiration, that comes from an ingredient it becomes laser focused. It brings all of that stuff into a story that then becomes the plate. And that to me is really exciting. And we showcase that at all of the restaurants. But in particular at 21 Royal, where we get each course is has a song title or a title of the dish that really is the foundation of what the inspiration was for the dish. And it can come from anywhere, the temperature outside, the weather, the season, a color combination, sometimes we'll do just a black and white plate, where we're really trying to make something have contrast. It can be anything, anything will spawn it. But once it comes together, it is just it's amazing. And then it's, you know, taste paired with the wine, make sure it's spot on and then execute at the highest level.

Ashley

You know, we've talked so much about what makes your role special, but I mean, clearly, being a chef of your caliber, you could work for any company in the world. Why Disney?

Chef Sutton

It's interesting. My question when I was interviewed, I only had one question and it was, why would you work here? And I was like, wow, that's a crazy question. And if I was given the tools to be able to perform one of the things, I love that always done fine dining, but I wanted to open myself up to a broader audience and have that connection with the audience. And I wanted to share the skills with children you know, from 8 to 80 or however you want to word it. But that broad range of people and just share I mean; Disney is so incredible, and their care level is incredible. And the support that we've gotten through our journey has really been just amazing, you know? And so being able to have that you just don't get that everywhere and certainly have you know, I've been here for a while and I enjoy it and I know my options and you know, there's a reason you stick around and there's a reason the team sticks around, too. So, it's pretty cool.

Ashley

That's awesome. I love to hear that, and I think everybody that we interview on this show and really that I get to work with, I, I always hear some version of that, right? It's the people here, it's the reach that we get to have. And so, it's just so special to hear that, especially in a role like yours, that it really is it all comes back to how you're getting to make that impact and the people that you're getting to work with.

Chef Sutton

Great. For sure, for sure. For sure.

Ashley

Now, for any of our listeners who might be listening to all of the great work that you're doing and inspired by your career journey, what advice would you give to somebody who's looking to build a career like yours?

Chef Sutton

Have patience for sure. You know, enjoy the moment. It's interesting. Don't try to be something but enjoy the journey on how you get there. You know, it'd be so nice to be that executive chef, but every day was pretty neat, and it had impact on my life and my career, you know, study to keep yourself invented, tap into your intellect so that you don't get stale because it's very easy to get stale in any career. But as long as you're processing that intellectual piece, those passions that are going to continue to build yourself, then you keep fresh and light and it becomes much more fulfilling, I guess is the word that I would choose. But it's been amazing career and it works for my life. Been able to raise a couple of kids and you know, the company supported the pretty incredible journey.

Ashley

That's awesome. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Chef Sutton

Oh, gosh, just love you guys. Come see us at one of the restaurants. We'd love to have you out, say hi and let us know what you're up to and challenge yourself. Get something fun, get something you like, and then get something you're not sure you're going to like and just enjoy the journey with the teams and have some fun.

Ashley

All right. Well, thank you, Chef Sutton, for joining us today, sharing your journey and a look behind the scenes at what goes into all of our amazing signature experience restaurants at Disneyland Resort. I know next time I'm out in the Anaheim area that I will definitely be coming to stop by and seeing what you and the teams are up to.

Chef Sutton

Please do. We'd love to have ya.

Tony

Hey ya'll. So now we're going to dive deeper into the culinary world as we head over to EPCOT at the Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, where food is the main course. EPCOT hosts four annual festivals that bring brilliant gardens, fresh flavors, lively entertainment and so much more. Let's welcome our special guests, Chef Assistant at Epcot Festival's Chef Pedro Pomales. Pedro, thank you for joining us.

Chef Pedro

Thank you for having me.

Tony

Absolutely. We appreciate you taking some time out of what we're sure is a very busy day. It looks like you're maybe just a few steps from the kitchen even now.

Chef Pedro

Oh, definitely. I'm actually like three steps from the kitchen.

Tony

Amazing. Amazing. Well, really looking forward to our conversation today and learning so much more about your journey to your career, your time here at Disney and what's next on the horizon. Want to start with a bit of an ice breaker. I think in the other side of the entertainment world. We maybe say if your life was a soundtrack or a movie, what would it be? So, I'm going to shift that a little bit and say, if your life was a dish or a meal, what would it be?

Chef Pedro

For me, I'm a very simple person. So, a very simple meal to describe me would be white rice, fried spam, and eggs. It's a very simple dish that I grew up a lot eating in my life. So, if I had to characterize myself into a dish, it would be that.

Tony

Love it, love it. I'm a pretty simple eater myself. I know everyone's a foodie these days, but like rice, a meat and so that resonates really well.

Chef Pedro

It's not that it would be chicken tenders and french fries. Definitely.

Tony

Chef Pedro, we're here, man. You should see my little in-app order from the Disney World app from while I was there. It's not far from chicken tenders and french fries, I assure you. Awesome. So, I want to hear more about your journey. Right. I think food is so important and so much a part of our lives, but to have a career built around it is a really unique and really amazing experience. Tell us about your culinary journey.

Chef Pedro

So, my culinary journey started when I was a lot younger, maybe like five or six. My mom, she used to work a lot to support me and my brother, my sister. So, she would leave us home and she would write like something on the on the like, whiteboard we had like, I left

this protein in the in the cooler, you know, you guys can make something and, you know, let me know and save me some for later. So, me, my brother and sister would try to, like, compete with each other and see like, oh, let's see who can make the best thing. And then when mom gets home, she can decide who she likes the best. So, I think from there, I fell in love with food, not only for, like, nourishment, but, like, to see how creative I could be.

Tony

What an interesting experience, right. To turn that into a competition with siblings, could only imagine how creative and by creative, I mean like crazy the kitchen got.

Chef Pedro

Oh, yeah. A big mess. A big mess was made, definitely.

Tony

Was there a competition to clean up or was that, like, left for the loser?

Chef Pedro

I think that was Mom's competition when she came home.

Tony

Not one you want to lose, I imagine.

Chef Pedro

Oh, no, definitely not.

Tony

Awesome. So, Mom comes home, right? You all have made something. We've got to figure out who cleans it up. And those are really your earlier formative years. Did you have any other experiences that kind of led you to this career?

Chef Pedro

So, when I was in college, I also had like a kitchen job. And, you know, when I was going to school and working in the kitchen, I really every day, more and more, I found myself, oh, my god, I love being in the kitchen. I love cooking things up. So, I decided to, you know, stop going to school. I was going for education. And I really wanted to pursue my passion and culinary. So, I you know, I had the hard conversation with my mom. I'm like, Mom, you know, I know you wanted me to go to school, but I feel like this is something I kind of like achieving, being like a chef in my field and continuing my passion instead of doing something that my parents wanted me to do.

Tony

Yeah, that's a really big decision to make.

Chef Pedro

Oh, definitely. It was really hard. I think I was 19 years old, so I was still pretty young. And my mom was like, are you sure this is what you want to do, you want to follow your passion and your dreams? And I'm so glad I did.

Tony

That's awesome. And I think that's what college is for, right? To kind of discover those things and figure out where those passions lie. And that you were able to find them so early, I think is incredible. Obviously, you've been inspired, right, by your job in college you've been inspired by your experience as a child and kind of competing with your siblings. Have you found inspiration in any other chefs. Right, that maybe you follow or any of the shows that we see on TV?

Chef Pedro

Definitely. So, I think a few of my favorite chefs, Thomas Keller, is definitely one of them. And I love his work and I love some of his proteges as well, like Brant Atkins. He's a great chef at his restaurant Alinea in Chicago. Is a great inspiration. They do a lot of modern food, you know, stuff that breaks boundaries and gets people thinking like what food could really be and you know, definitely I love the guilty shows, like *Chopped* on the Food Network. I love watch. I can watch *Chopped* for days at a time.

Tony

So, you're in the festival world at EPCOT, which I think is so amazing. I mentioned earlier I was on property for our team meeting a few weeks ago. And as I was checking in, the cast member mentioned Food and Wine Festival, and my first thought was like, Jackpot. And then she mentioned that it happens a little bit later. And then I was like, not so much the jackpot, right? But there's so many amazing festivals that are happening in the EPCOT world. Can you give us kind of an EPCOT Festival 101?

Chef Pedro

Yeah, of course. So, every year we have four festivals. You could start the festival cycle with Food and Wine that's our biggest festival. Then shortly after is the Festival of the Holidays, then its Festival of the Arts, and then the Flower and Garden.

Tony

Amazing. And what's the thought behind the festival? What's the experience that you all are trying to create for guests?

Chef Pedro

Well, each festival has its own, you can say theme, but at EPCOT, since we are a global community, it has to deal with that. So, every festival will be focused on like for instance, Flower and Garden would be the fresh fruits and the flowers, so every global kiosk would have their own version of it. So, in one kiosk you could have like a wonderful blueberry lavender drink and then you go to Japan, and you can have like a fruit sushi roll. So, it's every festival has the theming, like the specific thing, but it all has to do with the global community.

Tony

Got it. So, help me understand. I guess the culinary world is, is that kind of the trajectory you start in one specific part of the food service, and you move through others?

Chef Pedro

A very typical journey through culinary. You would start out like a lower end cook or even maybe a dishwasher. I know for my culinary I started as a dishwasher and then I moved to like a prep cook. So usually, you start out like a lower cook. And then as you learn more and you gain more experience and knowledge, you move up. At Disney, you start like as a Cook II, that's our lowest end cook. Then you're a Cook I. And then my role, I'm a Chef Assistant, and then after that you become a Sous Chef, and then so on, you become a Chef.

Tony

And with that, I kind of want to shift a little bit, right? And think about kind of the career aspect of this work. And you've mentioned that there's a number of different roles that happened right along that trajectory. What's maybe your favorite aspect of that journey or the work that you get to do as a part of the culinary team?

Chef Pedro

I think the best part of the journey is like the knowledge you gain because a lot of people, they could either, you know, they go to culinary school, or they start as a dishwasher. But you both kind of start off in the same place where you're like, I know the basics. Like I know how to hold a knife. I know how to cut something. But like as you grow, you learn like cuisines. Like, when I first started, I only knew of maybe three, like three cuisines, and I was like American food. I'm Puerto Rican, so the Spanish food and maybe a little bit of like the Asian culture. But, like, as I've grown, I've learned to appreciate cultures I would have never even thought of eating like I love Indian food. And something that I love to cook is Indian food now. And I would have never done that if I didn't go through this journey.

Tony

Amazing. Help us understand how that knowledge is grown. Right. Do your leaders play a role in your culinary development? Do you have to raise your hand and say, hey, I'd like to try another cuisine? How does that happen?

Chef Pedro

I think it's a little of both like you could when you're especially working at EPCOT. You know, we're a global community, so when we're planning for festivals, Chefs like, yeah, I'm going to make this dish. And I'm like, oh, I've never heard of that dish. Could you explain it to me or show me the process of, like, how it's made? So, you know, it's a little bit of both, like you will you have to have that curiosity where you're wanting to learn. But also, maybe sometimes it'll just fall in your lap. Like, you'll just get lucky, and you'll learn something new that day.

Tony

Amazing. So, have you seen that? And it sounds like it, but I want to make sure have you seen that your leaders are really responsive for those inquiries when you raise your hand and say, hey, Chef, I've never made this dish, I'm interested. Is that usually well received?

Chef Pedro

Yeah, it definitely is. You know, our Chefs want to teach, you know, like that's the love of culinary. You want to teach everyone the best parts of food. So, if, for example, like a lot of my cooks they'll come up to me like, hey, I've never heard of kimchi, what's kimchi? And we use kimchi a lot this festival. So, I'm like, oh, great. I'm like, so glad you asked, because it's a staple of like one of our dishes. So, you like, you go through that knowledge of, like, this is what it is, this is what you can use it for. And, you know, you want to develop the cast as you were developed. Because I have a lot of mentors in this field. And any time I have a question they will drop whatever they're doing, and they'll answer that question just to help me gain that knowledge to help somebody else in the future.

Tony

Great. I think there's, there's something so rewarding right, about a career where you're learning and then while learning or as you continue learning, you're then able to share that information with others. Right? And to hear that type of environment is really cultivated as a part of the culinary team here is it's really great to hear, I think not to not to mention the learning that's happening there, the cultural learning that's happening there from a global organization like that. That's really, really great. So that that feels like the more technical side right of the work that you do. Are there other aspects where your mentors or your leaders are also supportive?

Chef Pedro

Definitely. You know, one memory I have I remember I asked my Chef, I'm like, hey, Chef, you know, I, I saw something on like the Food Network about like this Japanese sushi bar I'm really like interested. Do you have any recommendations? And they open their cabinet, like there's cabinets behind me. They're like full of books. So, they pulled out this Japanese cookbook and they're like, here, if you're interested like, learn about sushi, you know, like, see what you can get from this book. And maybe, like, we could talk about it next week. So, I remember I was reading a book about Brazilian cuisine. Like, they go into the Amazon rainforest, and they get like root vegetables that are similar to potatoes. So, I asked my Chef, and it was like a coincidence he pulled out a book is like, I actually have a book from a three-star Michelin chef in Brazil. So, he's like, read it and then we can talk about it next week. And you can like bounce ideas off of each other.

Tony

I'm learning so much about what opportunity exists to learn and grow in a really unique hands-on way. Right. Yeah, there's the book, right? But then there's the application. How do you go from and you're giving us pieces, right? But put it all together for us. How do you go from, hey I'm interested. This thing's in a book. This is now an item, right? Or a cuisine that I'm able to provide.

Chef Pedro

So, I think an example I can give firsthand is like, I got this Indian cookbook. So, I was like, oh, man, this is great. Like, I would love to get these flavor combinations I'm like, Chef, I saw this book, and I have this recipe. Like, is there any way we can get these ingredients so I can try to make this dish? And Chef, like, of course, like, that would be great. Like, you could make it. We could talk about it with everyone else. So, then the next week, chef brings in all the ingredients. He's like, here's your ingredients, make your dish, and then let's see how it comes out. So, you make your dish, and then everyone's like, trying it they're like, this is great. You know, maybe you can add a little bit more of this. Maybe you should take out a little bit of this. And, you know, it's not one person teaching one person. It's literally the entire kitchen teaching everyone about that one thing.

Tony

Interesting. So, from an inclusion perspective, right? When we are navigating cultures that we are maybe unfamiliar with in an effort to learn right there, some nuance there, how do you work with ingredients right but you're not exactly familiar with?

Chef Pedro

That's a very good question. Actually, recently we started this development program in our kitchen where we do like a mystery basket, right? Like everyone's seen the mystery basket, like on *Chopped*, for example. So, what we do is a lot of the people we work with, like they're all from different backgrounds. So, we'll throw something in a mystery box set not a

lot of people worked with. Like we have grape mustard from France, and we like to throw that in there for them to incorporate it because, you know, every culture has its defining dish. But it's interesting to throw a wrench in the plan. You're like, hey, make some like Chinese food. But I'm going to give you nontraditional Chinese spices or any traditional Chinese spices and see if you can replicate that. So, by giving the cast something different that they've never seen and seeing what they can create with it, and they're like, you know, I didn't even know that I could use, for example, we had guava one day. They are like, guava is so sweet, I made like a barbecue sauce out of the guava.

Tony

A little sugar in the barbecue sauce doesn't hurt anyway, so that makes a lot of sense.

Chef Pedro

It's the best.

Tony

That's interesting. And so, what I'm hearing, right, is that when I hear culinary, I think food. But it sounds like that space, that career, that profession is, yes, centered on the food, but there's so much more. Are there other aspects of the culinary world that maybe we've not hit on yet?

Chef Pedro

I think the thing people don't realize is, you know, we call it culinary arts for a reason. And it's truly an art. Like, you know, when you look at certain plates, you're like, this is truly beautiful. That's why a lot of when we make dishes, we want to we want it to be Instagrammable because you eat with your eyes first before you actually eat right. You see the plate, you're like, this is like a wonder, like, I can't believe I'm about to eat this. And then you eat it and you're like, it tastes just as good as it looks. So, I think that's the thing everyone has to realize. Like, yeah, like everyone has to eat, but there's different ways of eating. You understand what I'm saying?

Tony

I've got to ask Chef Pedro do you ever kind of go through, like, the Instagram hashtags and look for someone posting your dishes?

Chef Pedro

I'm not going to lie. I definitely do. Like, if I remember a couple of years ago, I was working in a kiosk and I was like, man, I hope I see myself in one of these blogger's Instagram posts and I would like search for hours. And I'm like, oh, my god, there I am. Like, look at I'm with the dish. It's so great.

Tony

Really cool, really cool. And that's such a different work experience, right? Where it's not just hit the ground running, right? But it's, hey, compassionate and we'll provide the resources, right? We'll meet you where you are, and we'll really add something to that passion as you make it a career and I think that's something that is so uniquely Disney. Right? And I want to shift to thinking and kind of talking about that unique aspect of Disney right. Or kind of a Disney difference there. You're obviously an incredible culinary artist, I'll say, and I imagine you can be probably anywhere in the world that you want to be. What makes you stay at Disney? What made you come to Disney?

Chef Pedro

You know, when I first started my culinary career, I knew I wanted to work for Disney. Like I grew up in Orlando. I came to the parks almost every year, once or twice a year. And I would always eat at Disney. And my gosh, like nothing will compare to like even a simple hot dog at Disney. I'm like, this is amazing. So, when I when I first started my career, I knew I was like, I have to get to Disney one day, like, no matter what it takes. So, it took me, I applied after my first kitchen job. I was like, let me see if I'm ready to go to Disney. And I applied and I didn't get it. I'm like, you know, I'm going to keep working harder because, like, I know I want to end up at Disney and I know I can do it. So, after I tried four times applying for a culinary job at Disney, on my fourth shot, I was accepted. And I was really happy because, you know, like when you think food at Disney, you're like thinking like, oh, my god. Like, everyone has food related memories. So, I was like, I can't wait to be a part of people's memories at Disney.

Tony

Oh, the culinary world is just so much vast. I'm learning, then maybe I thought it was.

Chef Pedro

Definitely.

Tony

And with that, right, you've talked a bit about the future, right? Of the culinary space, particularly here at Disney. And you've also talked about the career trajectory of someone maybe coming into the dishwasher and working their way up right through the overall kind of food service and culinary trajectory there. What do you see is next for yourself? Right. What is what's your goal with your career?

Chef Pedro

So currently I'm I would be categorized as like a Junior Sous Chef so I, I lead like our cooks from like the day-to-day operations. So, I make sure things get done and make sure things get clean. But definitely the next step for me, I want to be a Sous Chef within the company.

And, you know, I've been at Disney for five years now and I, I definitely don't see myself leaving anytime soon. So, I want to be a Sous Chef within Disney

Tony

That's awesome. And you've built an amazing career for yourself, I think in five years just hearing about your journey. But I guess that is that's what happens when passion meets hard work and curiosity. Well, Chef Pedro, thank you. I don't think I can say thank you enough but thank you so much for sharing so much of your journey and your time at Disney with us today. I think, I hope right, for folks that are listening and they're thinking, hey, is the culinary world for me? Is the culinary world at Disney for me? Right. I hope you've answered so many of their questions. I think maybe you've given me a few more questions than I had coming in, so me and Google will spend some time together later today digging into the things that you shared. But again, thank you for sharing about all of the amazing things that go into the food and beverages that we enjoy at EPCOT and at our festivals in the park, we know it's such an amazing experience that we're able to provide and a story that you're able to tell on the plate. So, thank you again.

Chef Pedro

Thank you so much for having me.

Tony

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Tony

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