

**CATHY WURZER:** This is a noontime show, so usually around this time of the day, people are thinking about eating. So we're going to talk about food right now. We love the tastes, the aromas, and textures of food, and we love how it brings families together around the table and friends together to unwind after work. Our next guests love all that about food, but they also appreciate how it opens the door to storytelling about people and cultures.

Chaz Sandifer and Julie Burton are the creators of *Stories Behind the Menu*. It's an annual series of four dinners that begins in February with Black History month and ends in December during the holidays. And I'm so pleased that Chaz and Julie are on the line. Welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

**CHAZ SANDIFER:** Thank you.

**JULIE BURTON:** Thank you for having us, Cathy.

**CATHY WURZER:** On your website, you write that *Stories Behind the Menu* is a culinary journey with a celebratory heart, and you bring folks together for a meal that includes cuisine and conversation and community building. So Chaz, how does that work in real life? What happens?

**CHAZ SANDIFER:** Well, thanks again for having us. We have a beautiful sit down dinner that seats up to 75 people quarterly. And Julie and I create a cultural scene that reflects racial health and equity through storytelling and food. So we bring in local chefs and let them create a delicious meal that we focus on through a book or documentary that reflects on how all the food in America has been brought in either through enslavement or through immigration.

So why are we not connecting? And so Julie and I thought it was a great idea to come together and sit with others and discuss what we are going through, the trauma, and how we can heal.

**CATHY WURZER:** Julie, you had your first dinner of the year this February, right? Who was the Chef? What did you eat? What happened?

**JULIE BURTON:** So actually this is our second year. So we had chef Mateo Maccabee this past February kicking off Black History month. And he prepared his amazing New Orleans style cuisine. And we had a sold out crowd, 75 people. We had live music, a saxophone player, and it was really wonderful to have people come together and learn about Mateo and his history and his family's history and his love of food.

And also in bringing that perspective in, that leads to conversations around, like Chaz said, racial health and equity. And amongst the people that are attending, we have conversation starters on the table that are-- go kind of deep into talking about issues of what Minneapolis has experienced and a lot of the divisiveness and how we can heal and come together as a community.

**CATHY WURZER:** Give us a sense of the questions that you ask and these conversation starters at the table.

**JULIE BURTON:** What does a healthy community look like to you? What does it feel like to you? Have you ever been the victim of racism, anti-Semitism, bigotry? And then, light, and then, what's your favorite family food tradition? How do you celebrate food in your family?

What are some of your favorite memories from your grandmother? So we try to mix in kind of the heavy, OK, we have to talk about the stuff, also with the happy and the celebratory mood. And because some of the stuff is difficult, but we really want to add joy and happiness to the evening and to the conversations.

**CATHY** And, Chaz, I am betting that each chef, of course, has stories about what they're putting on the table.

**WURZER:**

**CHAZ** Yes. Yes. I love the storytelling part. That was the part that I really wanted to build on when bringing this to the  
**SANDIFER:** table. It's about what is the history from your family? What does rice mean to you? What does okra mean to you? What does chicken?

There's certain families, as Matteo explained, like shrimp in their household and his mother's household, there was 10 of them, so that was like two times a year that they would get that. So it's all about the history and, like Julie said, the light behind it, about coming together and eating together and teaching each other about our history and our ancestry and how we can learn from it. Education is freedom, and it takes the ignorance out that is displayed every day that we see and instead brings light to the table to understand each other.

**CATHY** Speaking of stories, you do have a really great story about how you met Sean Sherman, Chaz, at this award  
**WURZER:** ceremony that you were at, and how it kind of led to the development of stories behind the menu. You want to tell folks?

**CHAZ** Yes, so Sean Sherman and I were both nominated for Entrepreneur of the Year for Neighborhood Development  
**SANDIFER:** Center a little over two years ago. So I had the pleasure of being in the same category as him, but he beat me. And so we had a beautiful conversation about who we were, what our businesses did, and how we got to this place.

And so he invited me to the restaurant the next day. So I, of course, took him up on his offer, and went there with a girlfriend. And he took time out of his busy Friday night to explain every dish that we ordered, brought some extra dishes, talked about the Lakota family and his heritage. And then, it was like the aha moment, and I said, this is how I'm-- Julie, we need to start *Stories Behind the Menu*.

**CATHY** I love the story. So OK, for folks who are now their interest is piqued and their stomachs may be grumbling as  
**WURZER:** well because of the taco food here, do you all plan to take *Stories Behind the Menu* to places outside the Twin Cities? I could see this really being pretty popular elsewhere. Julie, what do you think?

**JULIE BURTON:** That's the goal, Cathy. [LAUGHS]

**CHAZ** Absolutely.

**SANDIFER:**

**JULIE BURTON:** That is definitely the goal. Yes, and we would love to take this nationwide, for sure and Small Town, USA and really bring these different perspectives into different communities. And also, to highlight chefs in local communities. It's not-- yes, we love Sean Sherman, and we're big fans, and we also love the chefs that are doing great work here and that maybe nobody people don't know of as well that we want to highlight. So yes, the goal is to take this nationwide, and to spread this message of healing communities through food across the country.

**CATHY** So are you getting the sense that once folks push themselves away from the table and they walk out the door  
**WURZER:** that they have been changed? Chaz, what do you think of that?

**CHAZ** Yes, absolutely. So I wouldn't say we trick them, but we definitely throw a little wrench in their plans of what they  
**SANDIFER:** think is going to happen. And what I mean by that, Cathy, is they don't sit by who they come with. So and I felt like that is something that needed to happen, that when people are sitting by someone new, then that starts a conversation there.

It's very easy and you get comfortable sitting by people you know. Well, that's the whole problem, we're too comfortable. So let's get a little uncomfortable, have a conversation with someone, and create new friendships. Are they necessarily going to be your best friend?

No, but at least you learned about something new and someone new. And I've seen people come back with them like, you know what? You were right. I met a new friend that I actually have more in common with, and now we're coming back to these events.

So I think they leave with their stomachs full. They leave with their hearts full and their minds full.

**CATHY** Sometimes, if you don't know the person very well, you can be more honest. Have you noticed that?  
**WURZER:**

**CHAZ** Absolutely. Yes. Right because the bias sometimes leaves and the judgment leaves, so you're curious, so you're  
**SANDIFER:** listening with an open mind instead of just putting your stamp of approval on what your friends say. And I think that's what people have enjoyed, is they're sitting by people that they probably would have never sat by, that they walk by. They go in restaurants, sit right by them, but don't speak to them.

**CATHY** So, Julie, OK, so you mentioned the first dinner that was held this past month, right? The second dinner is coming  
**WURZER:** up, that would be what, in May?

**CHAZ** Yes.  
**SANDIFER:**

**JULIE BURTON:** In May, yes, and we have Melissa Silva from El Burrito Mercado, and she is going to be bringing her Mexican food and traditions to modern well. And we are so excited. Mouths are watering, of course, for the food that she'll bring.

And just her family and her story is so wonderful, and we're just excited to share that history with the attendees. And there's still tickets available, so [storiesbehindthemenue.co](http://storiesbehindthemenue.co). And yeah, we're really excited. And then, we have two more chefs coming for the rest of the year as well.

**CATHY** I think Yia Vang, who I adore, is in September.  
**WURZER:**

**JULIE BURTON:** We have-- oh yeah, we have Yia Vang--

**CHAZ** Yes.  
**SANDIFER:**

**CATHY** Hello.

**WURZER:**

**JULIE BURTON:** --and Heather Jans. Yeah, Yia will be amazing and Heather. So we're really, really excited. It's a great opportunity. Chaz and I have talked about this, that people come to us and we're doing a lot of work together at Modern Well on a regular basis around promoting racial health and equity and bringing people together.

But some people come to us and say, well, I want to get out of my bubble. I want to meet other people that are not like me or have different backgrounds, but I just don't know how to do it. And so we've created a fun way, non-intimidating way for people to come together and enjoy a great meal, meet some wonderful people, experience a great local chef, and do their part in bringing people together that you might not, like Chaz said, normally meet.

**CATHY** I think it's been great fun talking with you both. Really, you've done such good work with this. What an  
**WURZER:** interesting concept, and I do hope you take it national. Yeah. So best of luck to both of you.

**SHAY** Thank you.

**SANDIFER:**

**JULIE BURTON:** Thank you so much, Cathy. Appreciate it.

**CATHY** Thanks for being here. Chaz Sandiford, Julie Burton run the dinner series, *Stories Behind the Menu*. You can grab  
**WURZER:** a seat at the next meal, as you just heard, by visiting [storiesbehindthemenu.co](http://storiesbehindthemenu.co), C-O.