

*Theme Music*

**Marion Kane:**

Montreal's food scene is one of the best in North America and David McMillan helped to make it so. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth\*, and welcome to "Sittin' in the Kitchen\*". David and fellow chef Fred Morin own five restaurants together including their flagship Joe Beef, named one of the Top 100 restaurants in the world in 2016. We talked about his wonderful new cookbook, his friend Anthony Bourdain, and his journey through addiction and recovery. We met in his office above Joe Beef in Montreal's Little Burgundy.

*Theme Music*

**Marion Kane:**

I'm here with David McMillan. I've met you before over the years and I met you last night at Vin Papillon Wine Bar and we had a meal of small plates - delicious - mostly seafood and he said to me on walking into the restaurant, "This is watching the same movie every day for 15 years, running a restaurant."

**David McMillan:**

We just work at it together. It's kind of like working in a coal mine somewhat. It's day in, day out and you get good at it over repetition and you get good at it over many many years.

**Marion Kane:**

How many years have you been doing this?

**David McMillan:**

I've been doing this for a long time. I don't... I'm not good with years but I've been doing this since as long as I remember, probably my early 20s. We've been at Joe Beef for 15 years but I have another maybe 15 years of career before that as well so it's been a while. I'm getting good at it now.

**Marion Kane:**

How do you find running restaurants in general? It's a difficult business.

**David McMillan:**

Yeah it's a difficult business but I still love it. I'm 47. I'm happy to come to work. I enjoy the team. I enjoy the employees. We've grown to about 100 employees. Kicking and screaming. We came down here to this neighbourhood to open Joe Beef for it to be a 25-seat restaurant that was open five nights a week and there'd be three people in the kitchen and three people in the dining room and that was our ideal scenario.

**Marion Kane:**

You wrote a second book recently called *Joe Beef: Surviving the Apocalypse*. What do you plan for surviving the apocalypse?

**David McMillan:**

This book is a bit tongue-in-cheek. Fred and I are cooks - absolutely. We run restaurants - but we have many other interests. A lot of them are based on the apocalypse, shelters, with rockets, solar panels, making your own alcohol, preserves, *confits*, the old preserves of French cooking, jams and jellies, apple cider, salted meats, charcuterie of course. It was a logical thing. We kind of feel there's an apocalyptic

vibe around the infrastructure of the city, the traffic cones, just the general corruption, negativity. We work really hard at trying to create spaces where people can come and forget about the outside. They can come actually eat, drink, and relax, be on first-name basis with the staff and just be well-taken care of.

**Marion Kane:**

I made several things out of your book: The Cabbage Pie, Smoked Meat Bolognese, the Dutch Babies and Pot-Au-Feu - the winter one. It's a quintessential French dish and it's simple but very tasty.

**David McMillan:**

I like Pot-Au-Feu. Pot-Au-Feu's a beautiful dish. You can find Pot-Au-Feu in many different cultures all over the world and kind of a similar recipe we'll see it in different cultures. Ultimately there's nothing more comforting than a boiled dinner of meat, tertiary cuts of meat and root vegetables, cabbage and a rich broth. There's something very comforting about it. Well seasoned and properly done it's an exquisite dish and it's an easy dish to prepare at home. Lastly, sadly, it's a dish we don't really find on restaurant menus anymore. Pot-Au-Feu's just not of the time. We made two versions in the book. We made a hot version and then a cold version in the summer, *en gelée*, which is actually with crusty bread and mustard. It's a good dish.

**Marion Kane:**

So the sharing of good food with others is an antidote to the apocalypse?

**David McMillan:**

It's key. The point of the book as well is for people to actually spend a little bit of time cooking, spend a little bit of time with their family, have a strategy to get out of town, have a bag in the back. What should be in your bag in the back trunk of your car? All with a dose of humour this book is made for the apocalypse but comedically somewhat. We are more or less promoting people to or hoping that people will cook more at home and more with family. Put their phones down. Go to the lake. Go to the country.

**Marion Kane:**

You said to me 14 years ago you are a blue-collar worker who puts steak on a plate. Do you still believe that?

**David McMillan:**

Yeah. Absolutely. We always say, Fred and I, that we... I am your humble servant, right, where we know our place. It's my pleasure to serve. I serve the public with pleasure. I'm a cook. I run restaurants. I greet people. I make people feel comfortable. I realize who's in the dining room, who I have to deal with, and it's just an orchestration really of front of the house - back of the house. But it's very much what we call a job and it's also a skilled trade. Within this trade there are many. We have to understand many things to run a restaurant. We have to understand the playlists, good taste, a chair, a deep understanding of bar alcohol, a deep understanding of natural wine, a deep understanding animal protein's locality, a deep understanding of seasonality, and a deep understanding of who's in the dining room. It's a never-ending quest. I'm still learning at 47 a ton of things. I run these little restaurants really but it's fascinating work still and it changes and it evolves and it doesn't. It's very old work that we do. The dynamic of a six-burner stove and a deep-fryer and a two-door fridge, a cash register and a coffee machine and tables and chairs in a dining room haven't changed much in 2000 years right? We practice a very old trade.

**Marion Kane:**

You got some exposure when you were on Anthony Bourdain's show *Parts Unknown*. How long did you know him, Anthony Bourdain? Uncle Tony you call him.

**David McMillan:**

Uncle Tony, absolutely. We started working with Tony years ago. We didn't really even know who he was. We were asked by someone locally to help out at a book launch and back then Tony was still travelling the world with a suitcase hawking books at bookstores. We had a little get-together. We met him at Globe actually back in the day. We went out for dinner with him at l'Express. We went out drinking afterwards. A year later he was back in town with another book and we did party at Liverpool House. We invited a bunch of chefs. We had a good party together. As the rise of Bourdain happened I think a lot of the people that he knew early on who rose with him he was very faithful to us as we were to him. Whenever he needed us, we were there and, whenever we needed him, he was always available to us. But he was like that for everybody. We're the guys that he was like that with in Montreal.

**Marion Kane:**

He loved Montreal.

**David McMillan:**

Yeah, he loved Montreal. Tony was a Francophile. He enjoyed French cooking, he enjoyed l'Express, He enjoyed Martin Picard. He enjoyed Hymie at Beauty's. He could identify the beating hearts of the city. He could tell like, "This is smoke and mirrors.... this is legit... this is smoke and mirrors... this is gonna close in a year... this is of trend... and this is here to stay..." Any cook, any good cook, he could see through the bullshit really and associate himself with the things that were truthful, that had bones, that had backbone, that were going to go on.

**Marion Kane:**

You appeared on *Parts Unknown* in Montreal and in Newfoundland.

**David McMillan:**

Yeah. I think we shot in November last year. We shot in Newfoundland.

**Marion Kane:**

Shortly after Anthony Bourdain died and you gave an interview to the *Montreal Gazette*. A very honest courageous interview in which you told about your addictions.

**David McMillan:**

I think that little trip at the end of last year was kind of the breaking point for me. I'd been drinking irresponsibly and using drugs occasionally for a very long time, since I'm a child really.

**Marion Kane:**

You've been sober almost a year and I celebrate 10 years of sobriety from a cross-addiction to sleeping pills and vodka. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, it will be 10 years for me.

**David McMillan:**

Congratulations. That's great news.

**Marion Kane:**

How do you feel now?

**David McMillan:**

I feel great. Yet I wish I'd known earlier. I wish I'd been interventioned in my 30s but the fact is I wasn't. I think I got the complete package when I went to rehab. I got the restaurateur's package. As far as that goes, I'm very happy and confident in my recovery. I'm enjoying every day. I get happier daily.

**Marion Kane:**

You look different.

**David McMillan:**

Thanks. Well, you know with sobriety comes health. There's a little bit of vanity I think. It's one of the gifts of sobriety. I also learned in therapy that self-love is okay. To look good is okay. When you're constantly depressed and sad from alcoholism or constantly in a general state of hangover, just sedated somewhat, there's a certain lack of care of yourself or self-love. I find as sobriety moves forward I take better care of myself, better care of the people around me. I try to be kinder. I try to be gentler. I listen more clearly. I take account of people's emotions in a way that I didn't in the past because I was selfish. I worry about people at an emotional level whereas before the only thing I worried about was getting alcohol in me. It's cool to be able to have this opportunity at 47 years old to keep on working in the restaurant industry and have a second shot at it ultimately. I went to rehab with men and women who left rehab to go to jail, to go to broken marriages or to go to no jobs. I left rehab to come back to this beautiful company and five restaurants, a couple of other side businesses, with a wonderful group of 100 employees I care for, that care for me. It's great. I'm happy to get this crack at it right now again.

**Marion Kane:**

Many chefs and restaurateurs have told me how the business feeds their addiction. How do you think it does?

**David McMillan:**

Because we're in this constant "this is a food... taste... what do you think about the food, the food, the food...this beef, this beef... what about this cheese, this cheese, this cheese..." and to know and be able to speak about any of these subjects that we practice here in this restaurant is to know them inside out so I have drank all the wines in Burgundy. I've drank all the wines of the world. I've worked hundreds of hours upon thousands of hours in the kitchen so your life is about overconsumption - overeating, overdrinking, overcompensating, over all kinds of different things. Plus the hours are ridiculous and it's normalized. Some people come to this restaurant once a week and have a beautiful dinner with wine and then they go back to their normal lives. I live here in these restaurants and I work in them every day and my career was working in them every day so it was every day about food, every day about wine. Then you just turn around and realize that you've been in restaurants for 25 years and drinking wine every day of the week is normal. Then you go from one glass of wine every day to a bottle every day to two bottles every day and next thing you know you've been drinking three bottles a day for eight years. Then you get hard questions asked to you in therapy like, "How many bottles of wine did you have this week?" and you have to think really hard and it could be 21. It may be 28. And then the hard question comes after that: "Do you think that's a normal number of bottles of wine to drink in a seven-day period?". No. It doesn't sound like a normal amount of wine to drink in a seven-day period you see.

**Marion Kane:**

More is better. Do everything to excess and be obsessed about things." Do you think that's an addict's mind?

**David McMillan:**

Oh, for sure. I'm addicted to so many things. That's why I currently just don't say that I'm an alcoholic. I'll say I'm an addict and an alcoholic. When I was a child I was addicted to food. After that I was addicted to weed. After that I was addicted to beer. Then wine and all the alcohols and then just overconsumption of everything at the end.

**Marion Kane:**

What made you stop?

**David McMillan:**

A group of friends got together and interventioned me. I looked into quitting so many times on my own. I Googled it a hundred times. I really have to tip my hat to people who pull themselves out of addiction and alcoholism without extreme help and therapy. I know not everybody could afford a fancy rehab like I did so I really think it's important to realize that some people all that they have is AA and to give props to that somehow. I was interventioned by managers and friends ... people that were seeing me destroy myself inside these restaurants. I'd screwed up enough for 10 people to get together and intervention me and ship me off to rehab. I didn't find it. I'd been ready to go for six months before that so off I went and it was the best thing I've ever done.

**Marion Kane:**

My late mentor said, "My addiction was an invitation to a path of discovery. In some ways it is a gift."

**David McMillan:**

I believe strongly in the gifts of sobriety. I saw changes right away. I saw changes at 16 weeks. There's a happiness that I have now that I haven't had in 20 years. To actually live life not selfishly and to be able to to appreciate other people, to appreciate my friends, to appreciate my colleagues, to appreciate a cup of coffee, to appreciate the morning smell of grass, to be able to appreciate every day is amazing. Just to wake up in the morning I still have a nervous habit from my years of drinking where I wake up in the morning and I shake my head to see how bad my hangover is and I've still been doing that for eight months. Every morning I get a gift right when I wake up that I don't have a hangover. With that came control over anger which is a gift. With that came control over stress which is a gift. So yeah, I believe in the fruits and I believe in the gifts of sobriety very much.

**Marion Kane:**

You had immense respect for Uncle Tony. You called him a dark dude in the interview you gave after his death. Would you wish he had this that you have?

**David McMillan:**

No, you know, everybody has his path. For sure I wish that he'd reached out to someone. I wish it didn't happen. It was devastating for not just his friends or family but for millions of people all over the world. He touched people in a way that you remember forever.

**Marion Kane:**

I will remember him for something you said you heard him say: "Be nice. Be kind. Be sweet. Don't be a shit person."

**David McMillan:**

Yeah. He just wanted everybody to be kind. He thought everybody... all the cultures and all the people and all the factions are the same once they get around the dinner table, right? Just live your life mellow, enjoy yourselves, your family, your friends, and your kids. That's what he said I guess.

**Marion Kane:**

I keep that in mind. It's an uplifting message.

**David McMillan:**

Well you have to work hard not to be... it's easy to be negative. It's easy to dismiss people. It's kind of fun. I can see people come into the restaurant that I might not want to talk to and I could scurry out the back. The fact is that people are here to eat and drink and come to my restaurant, mine and Fred's restaurant, and I think we make a point of being able to touch all the tables and speak to the people and get to first-name basis with people and create a warm environment. By forcing myself to do that and Fred forcing himself to do that the staff does it by default. If I don't create a kind loving warm environment for the customers by example then the waiters won't either. You don't tell someone what to do you show someone what to do. I can tell you to clean the toilet. That's a good example I use in the kitchen. You should never tell a busboy how to clean a toilet. Show a busboy how to clean a toilet. I clean a toilet better than anybody. When I clean a toilet, it's very clean and from then on that person who I've showed will do it that way. Now take that and apply it to everything. Don't tell someone to make a martini, show them how to make a martini. I could say, "Go clean the fish downstairs. Let's go clean fish together." It's like that. This is the way I want people to be treated inside the restaurant so I treat people that way in the restaurant. Even if I don't feel like it. To set the example to show people how to host, show people how to be warm, show people how loud the music should be, show people how cold the wine should be, show people how thick a steak should be. It's that.

**Marion Kane:**

Be kind. Be sweet.

**David McMillan:**

Yeah. Exactly. Costs nothing.

*Theme Music*

**Marion Kane:**

That was my conversation with David McMillan. His new book *Joe Beef: Surviving the Apocalypse* is available now. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth\*. You can find more stories like this one at [marionkane.com](http://marionkane.com) and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.

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