

Marion Kane: The food of America's South is rich and comforting with deep roots and a troubled past. Perhaps the same could be said for the today's guest. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth and welcome to Sittin' in the Kitchen. Sean Brock is a Southern chef who says he was raised in the Appalachian banjo country. He's a James Beard award winner for both his cooking and his writing. We spoke about his recent move to Nashville, fatherhood, Anthony Bourdain, sobriety and fried chicken at George Brown college in Toronto

Marion Kane: I'm here at George Brown College with well-known chef Sean Brock. He's here to speak about his new cookbook "South." It's your only stop in Canada.

Sean Brock: This is my only stop outside of America. And I forgot my passport. Oh my God. I realized that I didn't have my passport about 6:30 last night, like an idiot. And so then my wife FedEx'd it overnight. I had to change some flights around canceling interviews, but I made it.

Marion Kane: You lived and worked in Charleston, South Carolina. Now you've moved to Nashville and have a child.

Sean Brock: Yes, Leo turned eight months on the 27th and spend the most amazing, incredible, incredible, incredible thing. And it's the perfect timing in my life and the gratitude is overwhelming.

Marion Kane: How old are you?

Sean Brock: I am 41.

Marion Kane: I had a child at age 41. She's now 31. You were raised in a small Appalachian town or village called Pound in Virginia. What was that like?

Sean Brock: So the area that I grew up in was as rural as it could possibly be. Very few businesses, no restaurants. And that meant that everyone grew the food or hunted for the food that they were eating. And so at a very, very young age, I got to be in the garden with my grandmother and in her basement preserving and canning. And it just made me fall in love with cooking.

Marion Kane: I saw your video of your mum and you cooking chicken and dumplings. I made it. I made it with a few tweaks - I used boneless chicken thighs and I made her dumpling recipe. It's only self-raising flour and buttermilk. It worked.

Sean Brock: Yes. And you can sneak butter in there if you want. It's funny, sometimes she'll does it, sometimes she won't.

Marion Kane: I know you from TV, The Mind of a Chef, eight episodes and from Parts Unknown in the iconic episode on Charleston with Anthony Bourdain. You ate at the Waffle House. You said it was a magical spiritual place. You were both intoxicated.

Sean Brock: So that was a really, one of the most amazing memories of my entire life was having opportunity to write that episode. And Tony gave me just the full creative freedom to write that episode and he had one request and that was to eat at the waffle house. So I said, "Well, you're not gonna like it if we go there sober." So in true fashion, we had to get really, really intoxicated before we went. And that is precisely what we did.

Marion Kane: It evoked memories of my being intoxicated and loving the food of a diner.

Sean Brock: Yes, yes, yes. That's the thing. And we need those places no matter where we are, those nostalgic, iconic places where it's not about picking the food apart and saying, "Oh well the food is not that good." It's not, I mean it's so much more than that. It's just these places where we can let our guards down and all be in one place. At the same time, it doesn't matter who you are, where from everybody's there just to have a good time and enjoy old fashioned ways.

Marion Kane: It was five courses I remember.

Sean Brock: So what's awesome is so many people go and now and just order the tasting menu from that episode. Let's just say I'm glad that there were cameras there to record it because I probably wouldn't have remembered most of them.

Marion Kane: Do you miss Tony?

Sean Brock: Yeah. During this book tour, a lot of people have asked me about my relationship with him and what I learned from him. I mean it's just such a heartbreaking thing and now I'm really heartbroken for his family, his daughter and his wife. I know what it's like to grow up without a dad. Yeah, I miss him every day.

Marion Kane: I miss him too. I interviewed him in 2000 when his book Kitchen Confidential came out.

Sean Brock: How was that? There's not a lot of people who can say that.

Marion Kane: I was the first one to interview him in Canada and it was a good interview. I'll send it to you. And I discovered him over his book and he was a consummate storyteller.

Sean Brock: Yeah. He had a way with words and he was always very quick with words. And if you go back and watch some of the episodes, you'll notice how quiet and respectful he is when he's in these different places. And you don't really realize that because the voiceovers are so brilliant. He was able to translate all these feelings that he experienced and all the things that you learned in each of these different cultures through the lens of food. Yeah, that was really, really good stuff.

Marion Kane: I've cooked seven recipes from your book "South." What does it mean South in the U.S.? Describe it.

Sean Brock: So what I've come to realize is everyone has their own idea of what that is geographically speaking. And mine is ever changing. You know, I'm realizing that the South is much larger than I've always imagined. It's a place with a lot of delicious food history.

Marion Kane: What do you think of the standouts of Southern cuisine?

Sean Brock: So when I think of Southern cuisine and the things that we're the most proud of and the things that really set us apart, it's our use of corn. You know, you have grits and cornbread and bourbon. So many wonderful things that happen with corn in the South. But I think the jewel and the crown is these beautiful aged country hams.

Marion Kane: You have a fried chicken recipe. That's awesome. I made it and it doesn't use buttermilk.

Sean Brock: So fried chicken is one of those things that I'd learned something new or realize something new every time I make it. And that's what I love about it. It's the seemingly simple thing that you can order from a fast food restaurant or a gas station. And it's a true art form. It's a true craft. There's so many different components that determine the textures and the flavors. And my goal with this recipe was to create a crust that would stick on even if you kicked it. And I did and I found out that the buttermilk was creating too much steam and pushing away the crust from the skin. And so once I eliminated the buttermilk and allowed the flour to hydrate into the natural juices within the chicken. I'm so happy with that recipe.

Marion Kane: You succeeded in making a crispy and juicy at the same time. I made the biscuits, the cornbread and the upside-down plum cake.

Sean Brock: Who gets to eat all that stuff? Who are the lucky people that can eat all this stuff? It's amazing. It's so cool to see that you've already cooked that many dishes. That really, really means a lot. Thank you.

Marion Kane: I give the leftovers to the Scott Mission near my house.

Sean Brock: Oh, that's awesome. I mean, sharing food is one of my favorite things about it is the ability to cook something with the intention of nurturing someone else's soul. What a privilege.

Marion Kane: Thank you for saying that. You drank a lot of bourbon.

Sean Brock: Yes, absolutely. I, you know, I was a big part of my identity. I was so passionate about it. Once I started having the health issues because of drinking. At work, it

was hard to use a knife because of double vision. I convinced myself that my future was being the world's greatest bourbon expert and making the world's greatest bourbon.

Marion Kane: You collected bourbon?

Sean Brock: I had one of the most crazy collections of bourbon one. One bottle of bourbon Tony Bourdain gave me that was almost 100 years old.

Marion Kane: You got sober in January, 2017 via an intervention.

Sean Brock: Was one of the best days of my life. It was really one of the best days, my life. And jeez, I don't even know if I'd be sitting here if that hadn't happened.

Marion Kane: It's almost three years.

Sean Brock: That's so hard to imagine that that was three years ago because being in treatment for 45 days felt like 45 years. There are no televisions, no phones I mean it's you and a therapist.

Marion Kane: I know it firsthand. Awesome. How is it affected your life as a chef? And your life in general?

Sean Brock: Well, true clarity is something that I'd never experienced before. And as I sit here today, I'm only now discovering who I am. And that affects my cooking. That affects everything. And I mean, I'm just so, so thankful.

Marion Kane: I always end my interviews recently with a question. What gives you hope?

Sean Brock: What gives me hope? The joy and kindness that I see every day in my son's eyes.

Marion Kane: Thank you. Sean Brock. Thank you so much. That was my conversation with Sean Brock. His new book is South essential recipes and new explorations. I'm marrying K in food sleuth. You can find most stories like this at marionkane.com and the Apple podcasts.

Music: Thank you for listening.