

The Conch- MavisJay_FINAL.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello, my name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We are coasting along on our journey with this podcast talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're showcasing some of the incredible people working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today we are so excited to have a wonderful guest joining us, Mavis-Jay Sanders. Mavis-Jay is a James Beard Award winning chef, culinarian, and storyteller working at the intersection of food and social justice, who encourages communities to celebrate the joys of life and humanity through food. Welcome and thank you, Mavis-Jay, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's go.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:00:46] Yo, I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:49] Of course. I'm really happy to have you here. I know you're super busy, so I'm just really honored that you've given us a moment to chat, because I want to learn more about you. So, tell us about your journey to becoming an award winning chef and were you always interested in food and cooking?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:01:03] I just wanted to make really good food. That was it. I didn't know that it was really an option as a profession until I was like in my senior year of high school and I was taking college prep class, and they were like, what do you-what's-whats going to make you happy? And I was like, I can't remember ever being happy outside of, you know, hanging out with my family and having food for the holidays. And they were like, okay, cool. Can you cook? You want to do some cooking? And I was like, yeah, let's do that. So, I put on an application and then I ran with it. I was really good at it. I used to make cakes with my grandmother. She was the cake lady at church, and it was a way to stand out in my family. I got kind of into it. I was like watching all the Food Network shows and stuff like that when I was young, and then I ended up going to culinary school for it. I didn't, I wasn't able to pay for it. And so, my dad, I only had scholarships to go to, like, a regular undergrad and so my dad told me if I completed my undergrad, he would give me his GI Bill so I could go to culinary school. I figured if he was going to sacrifice all that, then I need to make a run for it. So, I decided to put my best foot forward.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:11] That's awesome. So, what kind of cakes were you making with your grandma?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:02:17] She made the best cakes, I swear. She made, like, a sour cream pound cake, cream cheese pound cake, Seven Up cake, German chocolate, all the staples. Red velvet. She made a coconut and pineapple cake. She made a 17-layer caramel cake that I still have been chasing to this day. Coconut pie. She did a good bread pudding too.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:37] Did she pass on those recipes to you, or because I heard a lot of people don't, you know what I mean?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:02:43] Yeah, yeah, I wish that I had had them, so she had them all written down. And unfortunately for me, she passed. Her house was kind of cleaned out by somebody else in the family who was just not really thinking about holding on to those things and we were overseas, so it wasn't like we had the opportunity to be like, hey, you know, hold those things for us.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:03] Yeah.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:03:05] And so I think being in a military family, like things are constantly changing, but you don't really hold, like, at least for me, even now, to this day, I don't hold on to stuff and like, it's, it's normal to just like, wake up in a space and everything, be completely different and just have to go figure it out from there and know trust that you have the skills to figure it out. But I think a lot of that comes from being grounded in who you are. And so, I don't have that. I do have, you know, the memories. I have the, the very finicky, like obsession with, like, getting it right, taking great pride. You know, I do think those things come from her.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:44] So you've been chasing those food memories, and they're very tangible, right? Because I can remember things that I've eaten when I was a kid and trying to recreate those, but I don't think it, for me, I mean, I'm not a trained chef, but it's hard, right?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:03:57] It is. It's, it's hard. And then it's also subjective, right? Like, cause it's not like I can remember this one thing and what we ate as children is not what we eat as adults. At least for me. I grew up on, like, you know, Hot Pockets and Banquet frozen meals and stuff like that, and you couldn't pay me enough to eat, you know, that kind of stuff today. But I used to love it back then, you know. And I would venture to say that I would hope that, like, you know, the, my grandmother's cake, if I had it today, would still hit home. I made one during the holidays, and this holiday was a little bit more strenuous than the last because like of family's, a lot of them getting older and there's a lot of like hospital visits and stuff like that has to happen. And we had to adjust to do it in a way that we hadn't done it before. And my dad had Covid, and he does a lot between the two of us. We generally do a lot of cooking for about, about 40, at least 40, 50 people. And so, it was really me picking up a lot of it. And he normally does the cakes now, and I did the cake. And he said to me that it was about the closest thing that he had had to my grandmother's cake, and it really did, like it hit hard that one. It was like the biggest compliment I think I ever received in cooking.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:08] That's amazing. What was it? What was cake?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:05:11] It was a sour cream pound cake. It was his recipe.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:13] That sounds so good. So, you grew up in a military family. Where were you stationed? Or were you, like, all over Europe? You said Europe, I think. Did you?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:05:22] Yeah, I did, I did Europe, we did Texas, and I did Alaska. We did Georgia twice and then all high school I was in Italy, then I came back.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:32] So do you speak Italian?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:05:34] Not really. I couldn't, I couldn't understand it like I do have a couple of good Italian friends, you know what I mean. And they let me, they speak it fluently honestly and I can kind of keep up with some of the conversation, but enough to reply back in English.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:49] Did that, you know, because in high school that's a really formative period of your life, right? So, did that affect your cooking style at all? Do you think?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:05:57] It, I'm gonna say no in the sense that when I was in high school, I like literally, when we got to Italy was not 60 days later was 9/11. And so, I experienced things differently. So, it completely changed how we were allowed to move out and about, like with civilians, like we were on lockdown. We all of a sudden had armed guards with us all the time if we ever left base or anything like that. And so I didn't have the same freedom that generations before me had had, like interacting with locals. But I really did cherish being able to like, go to a market and just like hang out and like explore and sniff things. So that was really cool. And like the idea of just getting it straight from the people who made it and having a relationship with them, or the people who grew it, and then the grocery store and being what is what supplements, what you get from the market. I really love that concept.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:55] Yeah, I like that concept too, so. Well, that's a bummer. I mean, you couldn't have planned that, but I mean, what are you going to do, right?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:07:02] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:02] So let's talk about, I mentioned you're an award-winning chef. So, I want to talk about a lot of these accolades that you've received. So, you've got a feature in a collaborative exhibit between the Museum of Food and Drink and the Africa Center, a Game Changer Award by Dine Diaspora. Am I saying that right? Is it Dine diaspora?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:07:21] Mm, Dine diaspora.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:22] Yeah okay. A James Beard Foundation award for leadership. That's awesome. And you've been honored as one of the Star Chefs New York Rising Stars. So, congratulations on all that. So, what are these awards like mean to you? I mean it seems like there's a lot of awards in the culinary community so I'm curious what do you feel about them?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:07:42] Oh yeah. Oh, do they mean to me and what I feel about them are two separate questions, haha.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:45] Okay! Try to answer one or both.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:07:48] The I, I think age is something that changes our minds or changes our perspective, right? I think when I was very young, I wanted them because of my ego. I think I got older, and I didn't expect to get them because I thought what they represented wasn't what my path was. They seemed to celebrate like a lot of luxury, and cishet white men who were just about like putting forth their egos and with food and really, well, I don't know, midway, I guess in my career so far, I had really let go of the ego of food and really just wanted to focus on making sure that everybody had access to nutrient dense, like culturally relevant foods. And so, when I started on that path, I wasn't paying attention to whether or not anyone was paying attention to me. I was just trying to do the work and trying to help as much as I could and trying to create solutions not only for me, but for, you know, I think for me it became very stark. The differences between like food access and whatnot because I was working in fine dining kitchens, Michelin star kitchens,

and nobody in my family had access to these like nutrient dense new vegetables that were being bred. I couldn't go home. I legitimately left New York and had to go to Atlanta and buy scallops to take home because I couldn't get, like, scallops in my hometown to cook for my mom for Mother's Day. You know, it's like, if I have to take a four-hour drive somewhere to be able to find good fish or like fresh fish, it really started to weigh on me. And so, in that pursuit of like making sure that or trying to make sure that everyone could eat in a way that wasn't killing them, I wasn't expecting to get noticed for that. And so, when I did start, it was kind of like, oh, snap, you can see me, and everybody's like, oh, like, you're really humble. And I'm like, I'm not humble. Like, I just, I wasn't doing this for them and I'm still not doing it for them. I'm doing it for my family and for everybody who looks like somebody in my family and anybody who's ever been denied the right to eat. And when, having the awards didn't change anything for me, per se. I think that, you know, all of a sudden you get emails from people being like, do you want to write a book?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:31] Wow.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:10:32] Or, you know, a lot of people being like, come be a contestant on this TV show, but it still doesn't make sense to me right now if it's not serving the mission, you know, of what I want to do. So, I think that it's interesting that the awards, more than anything, what they do is make me or make other people more willing to listen to what I have to say. It makes other people feel like I have credibility that I didn't have before. And so it used to be, you know, I'd walk into a room somewhere and people would want to know why I had a right to be there and who I was with and why, who I had worked for, you know, or questions that I would get, like going into a gala or going on to an event for like random, random people who didn't know me. And I looked a little different from whoever else was in the room. They want to know why I was there to now people wanting to act like they know me more, introduce me to people like they know me which is fairly interesting. I think it gives me greater access to people, also willingness to let me into their spaces and work with their youth and like get spots and get funding for that and that's also pretty dope.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:11:50] Yeah, let's talk about that. So that was a really great answer. Thank you for sharing that in those feelings because I agree, I mean, you've always had the credibility and you've always been amazing. And it takes something like that for people to go, oh, hey, yeah, maybe she's okay. You know, I mean, come on. So, we've met before, we traveled together in D.C., and we learned a lot about each other and so for me, this is an extension of these conversations that we've had and so I learned, well, you know, I also do research on people that I talk to on the show, so I did a little bit a little bit of digging. And I mean, you've got a lot of stuff online about you. So, it was and it's great because it's a, it's a good problem to have. So, you mentioned the youth and I know you're very busy also with a variety of nonprofits and working to develop curriculum offering a free, paid, world class culinary and hospitality training to formerly incarcerated youth, which culminates in career placement. So, I'd love to hear more about that and what's the importance of investing in youth, particularly youth that were formerly incarcerated?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:12:50] Yeah, absolutely. I think when you learn about the carceral system, how it comes about, who falls prey to it, and then the circumstances that most people do fall prey to, it can be daunting because, you know, I'm a Black female, I often come across injustices and, and face injustice and just blatant racism and sometimes harassment. And that comes, you know, from all walks of life, including the police. And I know for me, the way I feel about it, you know, it, the only reason that I haven't fallen victim to that, I feel like, is, you know, the grace of God and like, one right move or one, you

know, when a split second you could have gone the other way, you know, and I think that most people when I think about how people end up in jail or in prison, they feel like it's the fault of the person. And I just don't see it that way. I think that and I have enough life experience to understand that it's generally circumstances and systematic oppression. And so, the system is built to put people into these systems. If society is built to put and separate us and put same people in these systems, then what is my responsibility in that? And how do I create spaces where people essentially can make a run for themselves? Like if, you know, the opportunity works for them to get out of those cycles. I come from places where I watch people fall to generational curses. You know, you grow up seeing people go to jail, you end up going to jail. You know, it's just like a notch on your belt, you know, it's like a rite of passage and knowing and also being from that kind of environment. And one thing I'll say is my dad, my dad went to the military after having a go full grown blown career as a registered nurse. And like having won so many awards. And he was I think he was like 37 when he had me. And I was born with a lot of health problems and, and he said that he looked at me and he prayed to God that he was like, if you know, this child makes it, I'll turn my life around and do something different. Not that he was doing anything bad, you know, but he did in like so that they told me my family, I was a, he stopped drinking. He was a big drinker, but he just stopped drinking, stop smoking, like stop cussing. Went to church all the time and then like, went into the military. And he says that he went to the military because he wanted me to know a life different than what my hometown had to offer. The life that wasn't just based on race. So I live lived the difference of like coming from a life of like my family, where it's like, with a hometown that's like very segregated and people tend to be, you know, the lower income, no income side of things to also living in a world where people are traveling the world and people are, aren't worried about those kind of things when you're hanging out with other officers in the military families and stuff like that. It's a completely different world and having enough, I guess, realization to understand what the other people at the other side was like. And it's just it's literally just what they have the opportunity and exposure and resources to do and what they can see made me want to figure out how do we create those pathways to people who come from spaces like I come from? Does that make sense?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:31] Yeah. No, this is, this is amazing. I'm just letting you go because you're here. It's great and it's super informative. And, you know, you mentioned I think it's all coming to like, food is such a powerful medium to, like you said, it's about access. It's about creating a career, creating a life, eating a nutrient dense, I mean, we need all that stuff, right, to live. And so, on your website, again, getting back to my research, I read that your food focuses on celebrating Black American heritage joy, and a journey to reclaim Black food sovereignty. So how do you celebrate the Black American heritage through food?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:17:06] I think it's telling those stories. I think it's in highlighting the stories that other people might find unsavory, I guess. I grew up in a world also, you know, of like respectability politics. It's funny how people will be like, you know, there's a lot of racism around. Let's take, you know, a piece of fruit, a watermelon. And my family's in Georgia. There's watermelons all around. People grow watermelons. Cordele is a hot spot. Cordele Georgia is a hot spot for watermelon. And I grew up eating watermelon and, like, just being kids and, like, having contests to, like, spitting seeds out as far as possible. This little kid joy, having a blast. And at some point, in like around high school, I can remember, like my group of friends us deciding that we couldn't eat watermelon anymore in public, or we weren't allowed to eat watermelon in front of white people, because that was going to make us seem like we were uneducated in some kind of way. And then if I'm doing food, right, there's like, oh, well, you can make, you know, fried chicken or you can't cook or you

do anything with watermelon because that's just, you know, what white people are going to expect of you and you, you, they'll never take you seriously as a chef if you make those things, you know, and it's like, cool but our food is also like so much outside of that as well. I will make fried chicken if I want to. Okay. First of all, yeah. But also, and I make a damn good one, but I like making oyster po'boys, yeast rolls. I think of BlackBerry doobies. I think of outside of the church annex, you know, on Sundays, after service. I think just telling those stories, I think exploring with my family. I remember one time I was trying to figure out some kind of story to tell and explore a menu, and I asked my auntie, essentially, what's your favorite part of the chicken? She said, the back. And I said Huh? And she said, the back. And I was like, what do you mean the back? And she was like, well, you know, there's 15 people in the house and it was only one chicken and so you could tell who had been home based on which part of the chicken was missing because everybody had they part of the chicken. And she had the upper back. And, and her mother, my grandmother, my namesake had the lower back, and she would, like, split it with her mother. I was like, man, that's another way of looking at food. And so that dinner I went in, I got a bunch of chicken backs and, like, roasted them out, like roasted and, like, cut them down, like, so perfectly and roasted them and then stuffed them with, like, chicken hearts, like confitted hearts and garlic, and like a bunch of, like, you know, pickled mustard and all that kind of stuff, and, like, really did, like, kind of like what you would see, like a overdressed beef bone marrow kind of deal and made this dish that was kind of like a homage to, to that. So, you know, stuff like that, telling those kind of stories, you know, and serving, I love it. It was a fundraiser dinner. People were paying \$500 for chicken backs, and they brought me great joy.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:24] I can imagine. I just roasted a chicken last night but what you're, what you're describing sounds amazing. Oh my gosh. So, this is the journey, right? To reclaim Black food sovereignty and so tell us about how that looks once it's reclaimed. Like what does success look like?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:20:41] For me, it looks like Black communities being self-determinant in the food that's available in their communities. It's wild, especially when you think about cities, about like how many vacant lots there are and nobody being able to use them to farm or to garden, or people who do have them available to garden, but then they get taken back by the city, and that apartment complex goes up for the next however many years or places, you know, where people get fired for having fruit trees in their yards that like hanging over into the street. It's just, it to me like there's it makes no human sense on how like monitoring or restricting people's ability to consume what grows naturally in like from the earth and like the earth gives, gives to us. And randomly people just decided that they could decide which parts of earth we can use or commune with or steward in which, which one of we didn't have the right to, or that they have the right to say who has the right to all of it? And to me, that's pretty disturbing. And so, it's about getting acquiring land and securing that land and letting people decide what they want to do with it and how they want to feed themselves. Given the opportunity, what I know for sure through my experience, is given the opportunity, people who live in low-income housing, people who are subject to food apartheid, given the opportunity to have fresh nutrient dense food, they will choose that. And if for some reason there's a rumor out there that says that they won't, that they would rather have a bag of Doritos, and it's like, that's not even true. I know that because I've gone into the communities, and I have spoken with the boards and spoke with the residents this and asked them what they wanted and got the resources to get them what they wanted and gave it out to them for free. And they told me what else they could use. And, you know, yes, a lot of that, you know, is stuff that shelf stable like beans and rice, but they also asked for the collard greens. They asked for potatoes and yams.

They ask for milk. People want, they want, they wanted vegetables. They love the fruit. When we started, like giving out fruit in the line while they were waiting in line to pick up their food, people were ecstatic. And if we start to approach food from a way of taking care of each other, as opposed to just how to generate revenue, then that completely changes how any of these systems operate.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:26] Yeah. And I want to talk about the farming and the land a little bit more, because I also read that for you, where food comes from is as much of an issue of justice and equity as food access, right? So that's why one of your long-term goals, which I read, is to support independent Black farmers by providing land and other resources. So, tell us a little bit about this, because I think it might be a different conversation if you're talking about inside a dense city, you know, like New York City, as opposed to helping a farmer buy land or property in a more rural area, right?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:24:01] Yeah. So right now, that looks like two different things for me. One, I'm a part of an organization, on the investment committee of an organization called the Black Farmer Fund. Or called Black Farmer Fund. There's no 'the'. I just keep putting the 'the' on there 'cuz I can't help it. But it's in its second raise, so 20 mil to distribute. To give out in loans and grants to Black food actors who are anywhere in their journey. So that could be farmers, that could be CPG products, that could be chefs, caterers, that could be herbalists, all kinds of folk, you know, people who have little grocery markets and they want to expand to like a bigger storefront kind of deal. And that's in along the northeast. And so, I think that that has been my biggest point of learning. I started with the pilot community, and I want to say that it had to be like 2020, and I've been rocking with them ever since and, you know, made it to the investment community. And I've been building with and learning so much just about the financials and I think that's something that I am very privileged to, to learn. I think people obviously spend years and tens, \$100,000 to go to school to learn this stuff, and we are coming together and learning that and getting crash courses in it. And how to, you know how to read all these different kinds of documents and make judgment calls on how to help people, how to best help people looking for support, resources, be that community or financial help. The other part of that for me is my family has a farm that's been in our family since the enslavement, and all together, it's about 96 acres and take great pride in that. You know, it's only about 40% developed right now and that looks like, you know, it's conventional farming. It's my dad and my cousin Greg right now. And it's mostly peanuts, sorghum, soy, wheat, sometimes watermelon, stuff like that. Yeah. So, it's conventional farming. And, you know, I understood the expectation from a very young age that that was going to be my responsibility to take over and so I love working with organizations like Black Farmers Fund, Black Farmer Fund, because it connects me with a community and makes me look at that land differently. I'm not a farmer. I'm a cooker, you know? And, and, I don't have any grandiose dreams and romantic dreams about becoming a farmer. So, what does that look like? What? How do I steward that land? And there are people who've been studying that their entire lives and who really want that. So how do I leverage this opportunity to be able to build something greater and something that can bring about generational wealth for communities who haven't had that, or at least some kind of like sustainability and the ability for them to be able to feed themselves and not be worried about it. And, you know, for that product or whatever, they're growing to also be able to keep a roof over their head. You hear how that's more and more of a struggle every day for former farmers across the globe, you know? So, yeah, those are the things that I'm focused on these days.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:28] So I'm going to throw another thing in the mix. So, I mentioned that we met in DC because we're both part of this thing called the Coalition for

Sustainable Aquaculture. So now we're getting to the seafood part of this conversation. So, tell me how you got involved in the coalition and why do you support it?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:27:47] Sammy. It's his fault, haha. Yeah. Makes sense to me. So what happened was I grew up fishing. I got a couple fishing trophies. I love fishing, I love fish fries. I, like, love seafood. I love going out on boats. It's just been a part of our culture. You know, I grew up going huntin' with my dad, goin' fishin' with my dad. And, you know, along my journey of being a chef and learning more about just sustainable aquaculture and learning what's happening with the waters, global warming, all that kind of stuff. You know, you pay attention to it. And I don't live in the communities that I work in and the communities that I work in generally, like, when it comes to, like, fine dining, food, they have all the access to everything and all the best things, and I go home and I can't afford that fish, or I can't find that fish, or like the only fish that we have is frozen and comes from a place I can't pronounce. And there's so much mixed information about whether or not I should be eating that. And so, what I like about Coalition for Sustainable Aquaculture was I was like, cool, so we're going to put some research behind all of this so we can just like, bang this out and start looking at offshore aquaculture in a way that makes sense. That's not in a way that's not going to, like, destroy the planet, and everybody can feel good about eating it. And when Sammy first started talking to me about, it was like, cool, but can you make sure everybody like, there has to be conversation about in this about making sure that everyone has access to it because you can make all the greatest food you know that you want, but if people can't eat it as people who need it the most and the largest consumers of food can't eat it, then it doesn't really make sense to me.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:38] Yeah, that's a huge part of this and I think as I also am a part of the Coalition and that to me, the access piece is the biggest challenge and the biggest opportunity, right, because there is no currently ability to farm anything in federal waters and so this is what this is about. This is like creating a new food system, honestly, right. And this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, so we have to get it right and I think we're all thinking about that specifically around, as you mentioned, you know, your, you work in these places that are unaffordable to most people, right?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:30:14] Right.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:15] And so like to live there. And that's the same with these many coastal communities are unaffordable and you cannot live there if you're working there and so how can we create these new systems with that in mind, to ensure that actually there is equitable housing, there's access to all people, etc.? And so I'm really thrilled that you're on this, and I'll put links to all the things that you're mentioning, the Black Farmer Fund or Black Farmer Fund, rather, sorry, without the 'the'. And, you know, the Coalition for Sustainable Aquaculture and Sammy Monsour, who of course, he's, he seems to be like a common denominator in all of this stuff. So, he's doing a good job. He's earning his keep. So, I want to talk about something else really quick. So, a bit about you is that in 2020, you were a founding member of the Queer Food Foundation, so I'd love to learn more about this organization and its mission.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:31:05] Awesome Queer Food Foundation is legit a bunch of gays who got together and we're like, so we need a safe space. So Queer Food Foundation came together, and we really just wanted to be a space of community for queer people. And, you know, anybody identified in the industry, it just seemed like there was nowhere for us to learn about each other and nowhere for us to connect and collaborate. And, you know, there are a lot of people, I think at the time in food that we, you could just suspect

were queer but didn't necessarily, weren't out. And so, we wanted to create a space where people could feel comfortable being out and seeing that they weren't an "only." I can remember being in restaurants and having people be harassed, like, while working on the line by chefs about being gay or just, you know, being called all kinds of names and everything but a child of God while you are working. And, you know, how do we create places where people can have resources, people talk to? How do I navigate this situation? How do I get out of this situation? Is there a safe place that I can go work? And we really got momentum when we, the first thing that we did together as an organization was during a February Black History Month, where we just called out to the community and raised something just short of like \$10,000 to give out to queer and trans people of color who were dealing with food insecurity. And just like giving out grants for people to, like, go buy groceries. Fill out a very simple application, we're not policing you. You say you need the money; we're going to give you the money, no questions asked, and continued to continue to do that year after year. I continued to do that year after year. Right now, Queer Food Foundation is raising money to like, keep the organization going, because every dime that goes into it is just goes right into doing programming, community programming. We've partnered with James Beard to do panels every few months around anything to be queers, writing cookbooks. I mean, you know, queers throwing festivals, whatever it is, you know, so that people get just like, see somehow a representation of our community in the food community.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:34] Yeah, I've worked in, I grew up working in restaurants, and it's brutal. Like, I think it's I think it changed maybe a little bit. I haven't been in a restaurant kitchen for a long time, but I think it maybe changed a little bit in 2020. But it's, I bet it's kind of boomeranged a little bit back. Is that true or am I wrong?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:33:50] I was, I'm not gonna lie to you. I was in a kitchen a week ago and some guy touched my butt and, and I was like, this is terrible. I was like, literally visiting a kitchen. And the executive chef there, and I was like, this is inappropriate. He was like, oh, I'm so sorry, that was an accident. And I was like, yeah, right. But yeah, I was in and out, you know what I mean? So no, I don't think, I think the independent and the pretty places obviously have had to because they're so outward facing but I think most places are cafeterias. They're in institutional like, you know, corporate kitchens. And those places haven't changed.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:24] Yeah. So SAGE, as you know, because we've talked about this is about promoting gender equality in the seafood industry and I realize that you're not in the seafood industry per se, but you're definitely involved in and trying to make it a better sector. So, I guess I'm going to ask you about this. Maybe more the restaurant industry and you just gave us a really good example of something that's still happening in the industry. Inappropriate touching is what I would call it. So, what do you think about, like, what else is there about the restaurant industry and the cultures that contribute to inequality in this industry? And what are some of the things that they can do to lessen these inequalities?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:35:02] The biggest thing I feel like in the restaurant industry is more so about othering women as like less than or as weak or as a liability. I think that there could be a very, like, macho, like misogynistic culture in the food. And because of that, instead of changing the way that people who are dominating these rooms act, they would just like they'd rather exclude people who they would offend. And I think that's the part that has to change. And I think that these things have to happen. We have to create new rooms in which these behaviors never existed. And then we have to also dismantle

and stop uplifting the spaces in which they do. I think that we have to hold both men and women accountable for behaviors that have been just as seen as, oh, this is the way that things are, and actually push towards creating the spaces that we want to see. I think some of the greatest opportunities that I have ever had in the food industry have come from women who have purposefully put me in a room or purposely spoken my name. So, I think that given the opportunity as a woman, when you are in a room, I think it's important to make sure that you're leveraging your space to bring more women in in order to be able to change culture.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:43] So how can SAGE support you as a woman in seafood?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:36:47] SAGE is supporting me right now. I think I would love to collaborate with more people around the issues that they are seeing. And so if you're hearing my voice right now, hit me up. I am very much attached to my phone and very communicative. So, you can hit me up in my DMs and let's collaborate. Let's do a pop up. Let's do a panel. Let's highlight the issues that we see coming forth. Like, I'm down, I'm with the shits.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:19] I'm going to put everything that we've talked about in show notes but how can our listeners find you online?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:37:24] Easiest is on Instagram is @chefmavisjay – MAVISJAY -and that's, I got all my socials. I do have a website and if you hit up my website, somebody will reply to you. And I got a small team, so it may not be me directly, but if you hit me up on IG, it will be me directly. And I do check my messages often enough.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:48] I have one more question. So, you're just so incredible. I'm so happy to have this conversation. So SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry, right? This podcast is one of the ways that we're doing this. I'd love to give you the opportunity to uplift someone. So, who would you like to uplift and why?

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:38:06] Okay, I've thought about this long and hard. And for me, it has to be Katherine Miller. Yeah. Do you know?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:13] Yes.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:38:15] Okay. Bet. It has been Katherine Miller. And it's like I familiar because even as having this conversation, if I had never met her then like you and I would know even be having this conversation. And most importantly, she just dropped a book last year, like towards the end of 2023 At the Table, and it breaks down how you can be, get into advocacy work essentially if you are anywhere in the food sector. And Katherine Miller created a program that I ended up in called Chefs Boot Camp, and it was the first time that I ever saw myself as a leader with the potential to make a difference. And I'm lucky enough to be like in a, you know, a coastal city that I have a lot of access to a lot of cool resources and different communities. But I know not everyone is and so I think if I had had the book that she wrote At the Table, if I had a, if I had that book when I was like 22, I think it would have sent me in a direction with a different kind of confidence, because it's a playbook of like how to maneuver rooms, the questions to ask, and really makes policy understandable and like tangible. And I just feel like it's one of those things that people should, like, really check out. And so, she's put a lot of work into that and I think that I think she I think she's brilliant. And the way she brings people together is amazing

and builds community. And the way that she empowers people and what she's done for like generations of chefs is phenomenal. So, shout out to her.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:54] Well, that was a rousing shout out, and I definitely will put a link to that book in the show notes. So, Chef Mavis-Jay, we are at the end of our conversation, and I know this isn't the end of our conversations because I'm sure our paths will cross, and I just am so thankful to know you and grateful for you taking the time to come and chat with me.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:40:14] I appreciate you. I'm humbled that you would think I'm cool enough to be on here, so.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:19] Oh my goodness.

Mavis-Jay Sanders [00:40:20] Yay.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:21] Yay! Thank you for tuning in to The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Speaker 3 [00:40:36] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing, and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.