

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak podcast, coming to you from the sunny shores of Amelia Island in Florida and sitting across from me is the director of food and nutritional services, I believe. But it's really a fancy way of saying chef. Mr. Joe Urban from Greenville County schools in South Carolina, sir. I appreciate you joining us here on the podcast.

Joe Urban:

Hey, Brian. Glad to be here, man.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah, man. We're thrilled to have you here. There's a Mai Tai present, there may allegedly or may not be a pina colada coming up later. The day is young.

Joe Urban:

No frills.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's right. That's right. Make sure it's in a manly cup.

Joe Urban:

Yes.

Bryan Schaaf:

But so sorry, your occupation, you have a really interesting job in that you are a chef and you deal with feeding kids every day, right?

Joe Urban:

Every day, yes.

Bryan Schaaf:

Five days a week. And Greenville County schools is doing something unique where, in a day and age where we're school lunches has been a hot topic, really for a number of years now, even back to when Michelle Obama was really kind of leading the charge on that, they've been in the news a lot for nutritional values and what is actually in these, and how does that work? You've done some pretty impressive things at Greenville offering kids nutritious meals, high quality ingredients, and really making some headlines with the food that you're putting out there. Can you talk a little bit about the things that you're doing?

Joe Urban:

Yeah, absolutely. First and foremost though, I think it's important that we talk about the magnitude of the program in Greenville County. So where we are one of the largest programs in the country and we have 77,000 students. And so we're servicing all those students through over 106 kitchens and special centers in our district. So 82,000 meals a day are being served in Greenville County schools. So I want to make sure that perspective is there because we've come a long way in the past six or seven years.

Important to know that a ship of that size took a long way to get to where we are today. It was a thousand little incremental steps to get where we were.

Joe Urban:

But Greenville County schools, we're serving a tremendous amount of meals a day. We have a focus on high-quality foods, one of those being certified Angus beef, and some of the things we're doing in Greenville County schools, you talked about Michelle Obama and the influence she had on the school lunch program. And that's really kind of when I came into this program is right around that same time. We knew a change was coming prior to that, a year before that. We knew something was going to happen. We knew there was going to be some change in the nutritional contents of school meals. Rightly so. They were pretty much outdated back from the eighties. So we knew something was going to come and we knew we wanted to be better. Like I said, it was right when I got there and a couple other people got there. And lots of us had chef backgrounds and we knew this was an opportunity for us to really transform school food.

Joe Urban:

So before those nutritional regulations took place back in 2010, we had made some steps to go ahead and improve the quality of our food. We started removing a lot of the highly processed stuff that we were serving, replacing canned fruit with fresh fruit, and removing processed chicken patties and using whole-muscle chicken patties and getting rid of some of the pre-cooked products that we were using. And we started teaching our people how to cook again. And so that was the biggest challenge for us was taking a really a ginormous team, we have 750 employees in our program. So taking them to the point where they can go from really a heat and eat kind of program, which most of the school districts are back then, and still many of them are today, to more of a scratch and a speed scratch program.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. So when you look at the size and the scope of what you're doing on a daily basis, can you talk a little bit about your personal background? Because it almost sounds like it's an amalgam of somebody with experience running banquets and resort properties, and also somebody who, you're being tasked with kind of pushing the envelope and having to think about things a little differently, that a lot of times you're able to do in a smaller opposite operation. I mean... Yeah. Talk about your path.

Joe Urban:

Okay. So my path is unlike a lot of directors in school food programs. I grew up, starting at the age of 11 and 13, working in family owned restaurants. Worked my way through high school, working in restaurants, managed a national franchise while I was going to college. And after I left college, I was able to move down here to sunny Florida, which I miss after being here for this day. And I opened a diner and ran that diner for 15 years and franchised a few of them. So, my whole life, I got over 35 years in the food service business. So when I left the restaurant business and accidentally fell into the school food business, there was a tremendous opportunity for us to bring some of those best practices that we use in the restaurant world into the school food world. And some of those things are what were able to help us transform.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. Talk about, I guess, those first couple weeks, those first couple months, on the job doing what you're doing now. I mean, was it a thing where you kind of came in and you quickly realized, "We

need to do better. We can do better," or did it take a little bit of time to figure out how the systems worked and why they worked and really an adjustment period from there?

Joe Urban:

A little bit of both. For sure when I got in here, I realized we could do better. Coming from a point where serving high quality food and retaining customers was an important aspect of what we did every day to serving things that maybe we weren't as proud of, that was definitely immediate. However, there's a tremendous amount of federal regulations and bureaucracies involved in school food programs. So I had to learn how to navigate that. So fortunate for me, I had a few people that helped me along that path who had been here a little bit longer than me. One of them, who's still a real good dear friend of mine helped me navigate some of these regulations. So, the first and foremost, things needed to change. Because of the size and scope of our organization, it couldn't change overnight. You can't turn the Titanic 180 degrees immediately. It takes a little bit of time to get it there.

Joe Urban:

So we looked at low hanging fruit man. We said, "Where can we make the biggest impact and improve the quality of our programs from day one?" And that's what we focused on.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. The reason that obviously our paths have crossed, one of the things that you serve in schools is your beef. Your beef is his certified Angus beef, which is one of those things. And it's not something that we ever apologize for. Although it is scientifically very, very consistent and high quality, there's also a price that you pay for that. And when you look at how school lunches are paid for and funded and things like that, can you talk about how were you able to balance offering something that is a more consistent, better quality product into something where it seems like schools are always being pushed to keep prices where they should be?

Joe Urban:

Yeah. So that answer's probably a lot longer than we have here today, because it's a thousand different things that go into it. I mean, you talk about the procurement process from when you start, you can talk about the use of highly processed heat and eat serve products versus going to a scratch made process. So one of the things I looked at when we were really changing our school food program was item by item, looking at how I can improve, and eventually I got to all the beef products. And before then we have been serving a lot of USDA government-provided beef. We've been using a lot of regular normal K-12 kind of beef products that are super highly processed, pre-cooked, lots and lots of ingredients. Everybody has a different definition of what clean is, but by no definition were any of these products clean.

Joe Urban:

There's a cost associated with those products as well. When you pay people to process things, when you use federal government entitlement money to then send things onto a processor to further process that there's a dollar amount associated with that. So the first certified Angus beef item that I put on my menu was our burger. Our quarter pound burger that we serve every day in middle and high school is that we serve once every three weeks in elementary schools. So I did some cost analysis of what we were paying for this government-provided 28-ingredient, highly processed, pre-cooked product versus this three or four ingredients certified Angus beef quarter pound patty that I buy that's raw. There's like

a four cent difference in that. And so the reality is if you can really utilize, scratch and speed, scratch cooking, there's more opportunities in our programs to use high quality ingredients like certified Angus beef than most people think.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent, excellent. What are some of the... You said you started the burger, but I follow you on social. I mean, I've seen everything from short ribs to kind of you name it in there. I mean, what are some of the other things that you've been able to use?

Joe Urban:

Yeah. So at this point, we are the first and only school district in the nation to be licensed to serve certified Angus beef in our programs. So that means a hundred percent of our offerings are certified Angus beef. And at any given time, on every day there is at least one certified Angus beef product on our menu. Today, we have a certified Angus prime rib grilled cheese sandwich that goes with tomato soup on our menu. We pair that up with a regular grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup. So our kids have options. In our middle and high schools, they have seven to nine different options every day.

Joe Urban:

And so one of your questions before was, how do we afford to do what we do? Proper menu mix, just like we use in our restaurant, is essential for us to be able to menu high-quality ingredients like certified Angus beef. So I pair that certified Angus beef grilled cheese sandwich up right next to a regular grilled cheese sandwich. Obviously there's a tremendous difference in cost between those two. They are selected about 50/50. So that brings my average check down 50% for both of them. So it gets us where we need to be.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah, It's just like running a restaurant.

Joe Urban:

It's exactly like running the restaurant. So certified Angus beef prime rib grilled cheese sandwiches is one thing. You mentioned the short rib sliders. We do that. That's a big hit. We've done a Philly cheese steaks. All these are certified Angus beef. We've done Bulgogi cheese steaks. We do tacos, nachos, enchiladas. We do shepherd's pie. We do scratch made meatloaf. Just a variety of things. We've probably got at this point, maybe 23 different certified Angus beef recipes on our menu.

Bryan Schaaf:

And I assume I know the answer to this, but I mean, what's the feedback? I mean, I guess it's a two sided question. I guess what's the general feedback been from the kids? And two, have you been at this for so long doing this, do the kids realize what you're doing and how special it is?

Joe Urban:

I think some of the younger kids, which is... I really, really love this fact that at this point, this is all they know school food. So imagine that. We talked before about nationally, how school food just kind of sucks in a lot of places, and how hopefully what we're doing is going to transform into some change in some other districts. For some of our youngest students, this is all they've ever known. And for me,

that's amazing because if I look back to 12 years ago when I got into this, all our kids knew where chicken nuggets, and some burger that mimicked a flavoring of Burger King. I don't know how they got it there, but it was pre-cooked and 28 ingredients, and some taco meat that came pre-cooked in a bag that had all kinds of filler and crap in it.

Joe Urban:

So I think it's a mixture at this point because of the timing of our kids. Half of them have really seen some dramatic change in their lunch program. And half of them, this is all I've ever known. And I can't wait for the day where all of our kids, this is all they ever know. That school food just rocks. That it should be. It is what it should.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. How about, has there been notice from other, I guess, other districts, other schools, other similar programs, interested in what you're doing? Because you've got a lot of press over what you're doing. I mean, as hard as it is to turn the district, the scale of what you're in. I mean, do you see potential that this is going to really catch on to a much larger scale? When you look at other districts and other states and other demographics. Yeah.

Joe Urban:

Yeah. So you're right. We have gotten a lot of press, especially over the past, probably three or four years. And because of that, we get a lot of requests that come in, like, "How the hell are you guys doing this? Give me some tips. What can we do?" So we host anywhere from 12 to 20 different visits a year from school districts around the country. We've had people from Alaska, from California, we get quite a few from Texas, lots from Georgia. We've had from New York. We've had them from Illinois. We've had them come from all over the place. So I take comfort in the fact that there are people out there who are trying to push and we tell them all that, "You're not going to get here tomorrow, but here's some simple steps you can make just by improving the quality of the ingredients that you use in your menus, and then your customers are going to come."

Joe Urban:

So yeah, it's coming I hope, I think there's more bad than good nationally, unfortunately. So I'm very hopeful that some other large, high-profile districts that look like they're making some changes are going to come along too.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. One of my favorite things that you did was actually you did a dish that a good friend of ours, a good friend of the podcast, Carla Dilorenzo, from Los Tanitos in Miami. She is famous for her empanadas.

Joe Urban:

Empanadas. Yes.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. And you put her empanadas on your menu one day, right?

Joe Urban:

Yeah. That was a tough one. Because it's one thing to make 50 empanadas among a few other things for your covers for the day in a restaurant. But when you got to make 800 of them scratch made, that was a tough day. It took a lot of resources. But yeah, I was fortunate. I met Carla actually in Wooster. We were at a chef collaborative up there and we had a good time and we created a friendship and she's a great girl and she's doing amazing things down in Miami. And if anybody's in Miami, they need to go see her for sure. But we competed that day at Wooster, and we were fortunate where our dish actually won. Actually I think she might've tied. I think there's a tie for a winner that day. And her empanada was just amazing. Amazing, amazing.

Joe Urban:

So instantly I said, "Carla, I'm going back. I need your recipe. And I'm going to serve this to kids in my district." And she was just blown away. She's like, "Look, this is my grandmother's recipe. It's been in our family for 50 something years. We've never shared it. But hell yeah, we're going to share it with you guys." So it was fun. That was a great time.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's awesome. And have you been to Los Tanitos, her restaurant?

Joe Urban:

I have not, but I got a trip to Miami planned in the next few months. So yeah. I plan on seeing Carla.

Bryan Schaaf:

I was just there a couple of weeks ago. I was in for the Super Bowl for Taste of the NFL and I of course made the trek to Los Tanitos. And there was an entire bakery case in this restaurant that has nothing but empanadas and it's every empanada that you can possibly think of. And so of course, you get your steak, your eggs and you have to participate in an empanada while you're there.

Joe Urban:

Yeah. It was tough to do her justice because her empanadas look like perfection. We're trying to bang out hundreds of them. And we're trying like hell to make them look beautiful. They tasted great. Hers were a little prettier than ours.

Bryan Schaaf:

Well, it is. It's almost like a bit of artwork with the, I don't know what you call it. The spiral work along the seam. I mean, yeah. They are as pretty as they are good. One of the things that you do, and I apologize, perhaps I'm speaking from a position of ignorance, but as somebody who leads a school food program, you have a lot of close personal friends in the restaurant industry. And I don't know that that's always the case everywhere, but how has that... And actually one of our friends is on his way down here, Anthony DiBernardo, who you can hear in another podcast, if you happen to finish this one and you want to keep diving, is on his way down, is one among them. And I guess, what has that done for you to be a chef, to have a lot of those other influences around you, Anthony's case it's barbecue? But how does that work into your thinking in terms of what you're trying to accomplish to keep things fresh, to keep things new, to feed these kids?

Joe Urban:

So great question. Because for sure we try to be a chef-driven program. We try to change the perception of school food from being something that's institutional to something that's similar to what our students and our customers may experience when they go out in our community. Whether it's in a mall or in our beautiful downtown Greenville area. And the only way to do that is to stay trendy, to stay on topic. And for us, we're fortunate that not only we... You mentioned Anthony, he's my barbecue mentor. He is my brother. What's up Anthony. I'll tell you some stories about him. He's just one of the greatest guys ever, and just so fortunate to have him, but we're fortunate to have restaurateur and chef friends throughout the world, who are so excited about what we're doing. And so willing to lend a hand with their expertise or with their recipes, or just to share our experiences with their followers.

Joe Urban:

So it helps us grow. While I'm here in Amelia Island, I already had a group of sandwiches going on my menu next week. So that we know we look at everything we can in the restaurant world to find inspiration for what we do. We're fortunate in Greenville that we have Michelin North America is as a corporate partner in our community. Because of that, we have access to some amazing Michelin chefs. Once a year, during a food and wine festival, we hold a kids cooking competition where four of our students cook on stage with four Michelin star chefs working as their sous chefs. So you want to talk about having some high-profile partners we got them all, whether they're local chefs in some of our favorite restaurants or they are three and a half hours away, like my friend, Anthony.

Joe Urban:

Let me tell you a story about Anthony, if we've got time.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah.

Joe Urban:

So I got a school that contacted me about three and a half years ago. And they said, "Joe, we're doing a lesson for our third graders on South Carolina culture. And we would love to somehow tie into that with the food. Is there anything you could do different from our normal menu that will tie into a South Carolina culture menu that would help tie into that curriculum?" And I said, "Yeah, we're going to do something." So I sent my friend Anthony a text. I said, "Yo, Anthony. I got these guys, they want to do some South Carolina cooking over here. I'm going to do a low country boil. Man, I would love it if you can come up, bring your rig up." Now he's three and a half hours away. This man owns a restaurant. He's tied to his restaurant. He's got obligations. I said, "Man, it would be awesome if you can come up and I could do a whole hog." He said, "Brother I'm there."

Joe Urban:

And that man left his restaurant for two days, drove up, cooked a whole hog overnight in the middle of a once in a lifetime hailstorm in Greenville. And the next day my kids had a whole hog and low country boil to support their classroom curriculum. So that's the value of school districts really finding some chef partners.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah, that's fan... Did you have the... We talk a lot about BBQ Regionality. Did you have like the mustard base or vinegar based sauce with it as well?

Joe Urban:

We did. We did.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's glorious, that's glorious. As you look, a good chunk of the folks who would tune into this or subscribe to this are people who are in the industry. And a good number of them are people who would sell in the industry. And I know you have a good close working relationship with the guys over at Cisco Columbia. And I know a lot of times it seems like, I don't know that folks like that necessarily always go and knock on the doors of schools, because I don't know that they necessarily see it as an avenue that they could possibly sell product into. So I guess if you have a message to of those folks. I mean, if they knock on a door, would you imagine there is going to be somebody who probably wants to hear what they have to say inside of most public schools?

Joe Urban:

I don't know about most public schools, but like we talked about before about some more progressive schools starting to learning from what we're doing here in Greenville and wanting to really move the needle forward with quality school food. There are huge opportunities. However, you can't just come into a school district and say, "Hey, I got this three, \$3.80 Cents a pound, whatever for you that you need to incorporate into your menu." For us, when we first started this program, we couldn't do that. We had over a hundred schools that really didn't understand food costs, didn't understand labor costs. So before we even thought about certified Angus beef on our menu, we had to get our house right. So that was the most important thing for us.

Joe Urban:

So for these people that are trying to sell these programs, if they can offer some other kinds of value added service whether it be teaching them how to control inventory or teaching them how to monitor food costs or labor costs or whatever it may be that I know these distributors have those tools, that's a great way to offer that service for them. So, first and foremost school districts can do it if they learn to control their costs.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. One thing that you'd said earlier that really jumped out at me that... Just so you know, this is completely how my brain works, whether I'm sipping a Mai Tai or not. You mentioned that you opened and operated a diner, which from a very personal standpoint, I will always pull over if I see a really cool old school diner. Man, that's near and dear to my heart. And I will go in and I will order the simple cheeseburger because that to me is what I will always judge diners on. I mean, talk to me about first, your diner and two, as you think about that perfect diner burger, man, how are you building that?

Joe Urban:

Interesting. So yeah, the diner was a great experience in my life. I was fortunate to find an opportunity down in Inverness, Florida, a little, really, really small community, only 6,000 residents at that time. It was just a locally owned ice cream spot at that point that I was able to take over, easily converting it into a little fifties-themed diner. There was a retirement community. So the fifties theme just worked out



great. It was just a great time. I was able to build up a nice little business. I was able to employ over 35 people that supported their family. So for me, that was a big deal for me. We really, really enjoyed it. We did simple food. We had blue plate specials, lots of burgers, Philly, cheese steaks are probably our biggest seller by far.

Joe Urban:

For me, the perfect burger, I don't know. I think it's changed over the years, but I'm into that Smashburger now man. Dude, that's kind of where it's at. I like that thin crusty, melty, American cheese on it. Lots of grilled onions. That's that's my jam there.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. Glorious, glorious. So good. So good. Chef Joe urban from Greenville County schools in Greenville, South Carolina. Which I'll tell you what, Greenville is a really interesting place. And I was going to start to put a bow on this. I think we've got a few minutes left, but can you talk a little bit about Greenville? It almost seems like 10, 15 years ago, Asheville, it was like, people were just discovering Asheville, North Carolina. And it seems like Greenville is the new Asheville where I think people, it seems like there's so much happening there that people just don't know about.

Joe Urban:

I've been in Greenville a little over 12 years now and didn't know, but that's right around the time they started to make a transformation. Back in the seventies it was an old mill town and employed a lot of people. And then when textile mills went out of business, the town and all of the surrounding towns started to struggle a little bit. But Greenville has had such an amazing resurgence. It has literally made... I don't know. If you're on the internet or if you're on Facebook at all it has made every top 10 or 20 list that there has been in the last couple of years. I don't care if it's traveling, food, wine culture, whatever it may be. It's just a beautiful, beautiful place. Talk about a foodie culture, our main street, which is 10 blocks long has about 110 restaurants, thriving restaurants, in a 10 block radius. So it's just amazing.

Joe Urban:

We have a amazing cultural center where we have Broadway shows at our Peace Center. I mean, we got a minor league baseball team there. We've got the mountains within 15 minutes from us. I mean, so we're hiking and seeing waterfalls. And then later on going to get some pad Thai and a restaurant downtown., It's just an amazing, amazing place. If you haven't been to Greenville, little shout out for Greenville, you need to definitely get there. It is definitely a destination.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. And from a chef perspective, just because we've got folks who listen all over the place, if you happen to be in Greenville, what are some restaurants you got to hit while you're in town?

Joe Urban:

Oh man, you're going to put me on a spot because I got a lot of friends in Greenville that are going to get mad if I don't name them. But any the Table 301 group's going to be great. If you want a good burger, you can go down to Nosedive or Grill Marks where you can get a amazing certified...

Bryan Schaaf:

They got the dry-aged burger don't they?

Joe Urban:

They got a certified Angus beef burger at Grill Marks. We partner with them. You can get a little boozy shake that'll go along with it. We've got everything from super fine dining to just some of the best burger and taco joints you ever seen. So anybody that wants to come hit me up, I'll be glad to meet you and take you out.

Bryan Schaaf:

Glorious. Chef Joe Urban, Greenville County schools director of food and nutritional services. Sir, we appreciate you taking time for us, and on a larger scale, we appreciate all that you're doing for kids in this country. So thank you for taking time, sir.

Joe Urban:

Thanks brother.