

Episode 7: Interview With Local Chef & Restaurant Owner Andrew Silver

This episode features an interview with local chef and restaurant owner, Andrew Silver of Fresco in San Marcos. The conversation starts with Silver's backstory, his journey from Massachusetts to Texas, and how he started in the restaurant industry. He talks about his restaurant's focus on healthy, uniquely flavored food and the overall philosophy of his business based on sincerity, hospitality, and adherence to high-quality food standards. Silver also discusses his dishes, specifically their plant-based offerings, and touches upon the challenges of incorporating more plant-based highlighted, and the conversation wraps up with a new promotion they are running - 'Kids eat Free Saturdays'.

Dr Black: Welcome to eat your greens with Dr. Black, episode seven.

One of my goals in developing this podcast is to help families identify locally owned restaurants offering healthy plant-based alternatives to say, the usual junk food or other less healthy alternatives. So, I'm really excited about this episode because this is the first time, I've had the opportunity to sit down with a local chef and restaurant owner.

I would like to start by saying that this episode is not sponsored. I genuinely want to introduce Fresco and similar restaurants in San Marcos and the surrounding areas so that you know where to look for healthy dining experiences.

Today, I'm talking to Andrew Silver of Fresco in San Marcos. Our conversation starts with Silver's backstory, his journey from Massachusetts to Texas, and how he started in the restaurant industry. He talks a little bit about his restaurant's focus on healthy, uniquely flavored food and the overall philosophy of his business, which is based on genuine sincerity, hospitality, and of course, adherence to very high-quality food standards.

Silver also discusses his dishes, specifically their plant-based options, and he touches upon some of the challenges involved in incorporating more plant-based proteins in their menu. We talk a little bit about the importance of supporting local businesses, and the conversation wraps up with, get this, their new promotion, kids eat free Saturdays.

So, if your kid is a little picky - you're not sure if they're going to accept a healthy bowl full of greens and grains and other plant-based options - this is your perfect opportunity to try it out because, hey, it's free. What do you have to lose? So, let's get into our conversation.

So, I have the pleasure to sit down today with local chef and restaurant owner, Andrew Silver. He owns Fresco here in San Marcos and I'm really excited to have the opportunity to talk with him. Thanks for joining me.

Chef: Yeah, I'm super excited to speak with you as well.

Dr. Black: So, let's just start by a little background information.

I understand that you used to live in Virginia. You had a successful restaurant there. Tell me a little bit about your journey and what brought you to Central Texas.

Chef: Yeah, so I was born and raised in Massachusetts and then went to culinary school in New York. And on my first day of culinary school, I met a gentleman named Ivan Ricoche, who became my closest friend in school and then my business partner for 15 years.

And we moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, which is a beautiful place where the University of Virginia is, and a lot of people know it for Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello. And it was a sort of casual, fine dining, Latin, Southwestern, very similar flavor profile to Fresco restaurant. And it's still going.

It's going to be 20 years old this December. And my time in Charlottesville was sort of - I don't know - it felt like it was coming to an end. I had a young family. My family was in Boston, in Atlanta. My wife's family is all in Lake Charles, Louisiana. And we were just kind of getting tired of missing all family events, or having to travel great lengths to be at them.

So, we decided to move closer and Austin, Texas was where we landed. We also have family here as well. And it was, a close enough drive to Lake Charles. So that's how we sort of ended up here. And then Fresco was the new concept that we wanted to do. It was sort of, I didn't want to really own a bar anymore.

I wanted just to serve affordable food and not really kind of worry about what was happening when I wasn't at the restaurant. So, that's why I decided to go with sort of a quick, healthy, fast, casual. And I took the flavor profiles of Zocalo restaurant and sort of turned them into a down the line salad grain bowl restaurant.

Dr. Black: So that flavor profile, though, is perfect for this area. What a good choice.

Chef: Yeah, that was, you know, it was sort of my wheelhouse, so I sort of lucked into that by moving to Texas and that sort of being a flavor profile that people are comfortable with and familiar with. It just so happens that I have like a real affinity for Mexico and Mexican food and the people of Mexico and, and other sort of Latin, South American flavor profiles.

I think the majority of my traveling has been in Mexico and Central and South America, so it's just, it's sort of the flavor profile, profile that I love and just sort of like the cultural aspect of it that I love as well.

Dr. Black: What's not to love. I mean all the spices, and the indigenous, like, local foods from all of those countries tend to be very healthy. It's when we bring them here and westernize them and add the sour cream that it is less healthy.

Chef: They're the original farm to table concept.

Dr. Black: Right. Right. Do you have a particular philosophy when it comes to running your business

Chef: Sure. Well, you know, with Fresco in particular, I had no means like set out for it to be considered like a health food type of concept.

I think it's just sort of incidental that we offer more nutritionally dense options than perhaps other places do. The real goal is to make delicious food that's served by super friendly and grateful people. So, I've been very lucky and fortunate that we've hired well and get just like the best class of people working at Fresco and that we all like each other and respect each other.

And I try to cultivate a family type culture with staff, and it sort of self-perpetuates. And I think what people - our regulars - will tell you is that they like Fresco because we're very consistent. You know the food tastes the same every time you come in. And we've really made strides to get to know our customers and to authentically let people feel when they come in that we are grateful that they're spending their money in our restaurant because there's plenty of places you can spend money on food. So, when they walk through your door, you have to like, be authentically happy that they're there. So, my overall philosophy is hospitality, you know, being grateful forging relationships with your staff and your customer and serving delicious food that happens to be healthy.

Dr. Black: Well, I think it's working. When I was looking up some of the reviews online for Fresco, the number one thing that you see is customer service and the friendliness of the staff and also how good the food is.

Chef: And clean bathrooms!

Dr. Black: OK I didn't know that. Did you know that's the Bucees effect, or have you heard of that?

Chef: I don't think I have heard of that, but it makes sense.

Dr. Black: Since Bucees became a thing... Specifically gas station bathrooms now, apparently in any, any place that's near a Bucee's, the gas station bathrooms are much cleaner than they traditionally were, and that's called the Bucee's effect.

Chef: That's really funny. The Bucee bump.

Dr. Black: Anybody - any of the listeners from the Texas area will know what I'm talking about. People elsewhere will have no idea what we're talking about here.

What's Bucees? But one of the reviews I came across, and I, I kind of chuckled when you said that you didn't set out specifically to serve healthy food, it was more about the flavor. But one of the reviews was kind of a mediocre review because the individual actually said - the quote was, "healthy bowls and not much else".

And he was disappointed at the lack of unhealthy options because his wife wants to eat healthy and he doesn't and she drags him to your restaurant, and he didn't want to go. He was upset that you didn't serve more junk food.

Chef: I know. You know, it's so funny too because I'm very proud of the fact that we have like a kind of crazy, overwhelming, positive, you know, amount of reviews and very few stinkers.

And I know exactly that review and I know it's on TripAdvisor because we don't have many reviews on TripAdvisor. And that's fine. I get it. It's not for everyone, but I do find that once we... you know, we do see like people kind of getting dragged in by their spouses and one of them, it's for them, and the other people have a preconceived notion when they walk in and see a wall of greens behind the greeter.

I think if they can just sort of, give it a try that we convert way more people than not because like I mentioned earlier, our food really tastes good.

It's not subtle flavors. It's- we have bold flavors, lots of acidity, some spice if you want it things are seasoned well. I don't think it's salty, but I think it's properly seasoned, and, so, the food on your palate should taste good. And then, I think the effect that people hopefully will realize is after they've eaten a generous bowl of food, that they feel satiated and full, but they also feel like they're ready to go on with their day as opposed to an equal amount of calorically dense food that makes you want to take a nap afterwards.

So, I think that's sort of what we have going for us. It's go food.

Yeah.

Dr. Black: Well, personally, if I had seen that review before I had discovered Fresco, it would have caused me to try out your restaurant. It would not have deterred me. And my sister, who, she likes she likes a good variety of healthy food, but...

I think the first time I brought her here; she lives in the Dallas area and comes down periodically. And the first time I brought her to Fresco, she really was surprised at how much she likes it. And now every time she comes to visit, we have to come eat at Fresco.

Chef: Super flattering.

Dr. Black: She loves it.

So, let's talk a little bit about your menu and what you have to offer. Tell me more about your bowls, especially, of course, I'm interested in more of your plant-based ingredients. I know you do have some animal-based protein with some pork and chicken, but you have a generous selection of plant-based options.

Chef: Yeah, we have two animal-based options and then five plant-based options. So, like you mentioned, we have pork and chicken, but we also have roasted sweet potatoes and falafel. We use a black bean falafel. For those who don't know what falafel is - it's a Mediterranean bean patty - but we add a sort of southwestern spin to it by altering the spices that we put in there. It's heavy on the cilantro. We use a blend of black beans and garbanzo beans. Garbanzo or fava are what are traditionally used in falafel, but we put black beans in there to, you know, keep it you know, in line with our flavor profile.

And we have chipotle glazed tofu, and then we have grilled onions, mushrooms, and poblano peppers. So, lots of options for people who are trying to stay plant based. Most people who come into the restaurant will build their own bowl and, there's a certain amount of selections down the line.

We start with our bases. Those are all vegan and vegetarian. And then our hot items, which we just discussed, and our toppings, which I think we have probably 18 or so toppings that you can choose from. And then our dressings. We Have six signature dressings. Only two of them are not vegan or vegetarian.

And then some hot sauces, one of which we make in house, which is really tasty. And then we also have eight signature bowls. When we first opened, we only had four. They were lifestyle bowls. So, we had a, a keto, a, a paleo, a vegan, and a double protein. And then, you know...

Dr. Black: Just because I think it's funny, the name of your double protein...

Chef: Yeah, I called it the Swole Bowl.

Dr. Black: Swole bowl!

Chef: Kind of a kind of to attract the bros of the world and it worked. - We have a kind of a joke, you know, people walk in and we're like, Swole Bowl - you know, as we can sort of tell. But then I soon realized that the ordering process for a first-time customer can be a little bit daunting.

You walk in, there's a lot of choices. There's a lot of ingredients in front of you, so I developed four more, what we called fresco favorites, one of which I call it The Hippie. And The Hippie is, I think, my, I think, our best bowl actually, and that's also a plant-based bowl. And that one has arugula and our Fresco grains, which are black rice, brown rice, and quinoa: a little bit more nutritionally dense and has some complete protein in the quinoa, which is nice has our tofu in our sweet and spicy

brussels sprouts, which I forgot to mention earlier, but those are a big favorite of people.

Dr. Black: They're delicious.

Chef: Thanks. Some avocado and beets and carrots and sesame pumpkin seeds and, and sunflower seeds. And then two of my favorite dressings, which... When, when I'm suggesting dressings to anyone for any bowl, I typically will suggest a mix of the Sesame Lime and the Mexican Green Goddess. And so yeah, actually I think that's probably my favorite bowl.

Dr. Black: Yeah. It's so customizable though. I always do a build your own and, instead of your regular salad mix with the arugula and the different, you have just spinach, correct?

Correct. And that's, that's usually what I choose because I don't like arugula. I don't know why. It's just one of those, you know, things. I have never developed a taste for it. So, I'm glad that you offer an alternative.

Chef: Yeah. And that's actually the only green I put in my bowl is arugula, so, different strokes for different folks.

But yeah.

Dr. Black: Now, my other favorite is your tofu. And when I'm talking to people who are, I say, tofu curious, they want to, you know, they've never really tried tofu. I definitely send them your way because I think you have the best tofu in town. How do you get it so perfect? And tell me about the sauce. It's great. I would love to be able to recreate it at home.

Chef: Yeah, it's essentially like a barbecue-based sauce and it has some chipotle, which is a smoked dried jalapeno and some citrus in it as well. That just sort of, changes it from being just like a plain barbecue flavor to giving it a little bit of acidity and a little bit of spiciness and heat.

But the real key to the tofu it's really what you do before you put the sauce on it. So, we press it with weight overnight to drive off as much water as possible. It's a firm tofu that we start with. And then we dice it. And then it goes onto our flat top grill with a little bit of oil.

And we sort of caramelize it for a long time. And that develops flavor and a crust on it, but it also drives off as much moisture as possible so that when we do add the sauce it sort of takes on the flavor of the sauce. Since the sauce has some sugar in it the sauce caramelizes on the grill and sort of controlled burns in a way and that adds a lot of depth of flavor as well.

So, I'm glad you like it. I, I, we do have some tofu curious people or conversely, we have a lot of people who, look at it, and... it kind of looks like one of the more attractive things on the line, and they're like, what's that? And I say, it's tofu. And they're like, oh, no, thanks. I'm like, how about I put one piece on your bowl?

And I try to, you know, expose people to it, even if they're don't seem open to it. And a lot of people are like, wow, that was really good tofu. Yeah.

Dr. Black: Well, thank you for doing that. I approve.

Chef: No problem.

Dr. Black: And for, yeah, for our listeners out there, if you're at all interested and you've never had tofu, come to San Marcos, and go try it at, you'll be converted immediately for Fresco's tofu.

Are there any, any developments for future proteins? I know personally, I would love to have a restaurant here in town with a tempeh-based protein option.

Chef: I've definitely looked into other soy concepts. I was thinking about this more yesterday as you sent me these questions in advance, and I got to think about it a little bit. There is a product from a company in Austin -it's called White Mountain Foods. They make a Bulgarian yogurt. That you can find at, some health stores and Whole Foods. They have a product called Wheat Roast. And it's a, it's a soy-based plant protein. And they have a sort of fajita version of it.

It's just really hard to get. And tempeh, I haven't experimented with that.

I've had okay experiences with tempeh in the past. I do find it a little on the dry side. And I just, you know, everything that we have to put on the line has to be able to hold for a little bit and not lose its quality. So, long answer is no immediate plans.

One of the plant-based things I've had that I've liked in the past is like a soy chorizo. And I don't know that I love the idea of putting like a crumbly protein on the bowl. I think like it might get a little bit lost. One of the things I like about all of our hide items is that they're a little bit more robust, but I thought, you could do a little spin of like the breakfast potato and chorizo. You could put some, like, diced potatoes in with the chorizo, and maybe that would be an interesting thing to put on the bowl. But I'm glad you asked the question because now I need to think about it more.

Dr. Black: I know I've had tempeh bacon. So that's something to look into. Alright. Just to see, with the sauce, it might hold together more. But you're right, it, it can fall apart.

Chef: You know, the one thing we always have to consider is, is it affordable as well? Because I think even though I know that we price our bowls correctly, this is a college town.

It's a price conscious town. So, I want to be as accessible as possible, and I don't want to add things that you have to sort of have an additional charge for. It's one of the things that's kept us from putting beef on the menu because beef is a lot less affordable than chicken or pork.

And I don't want to have, like, too many up charges because whether people might at the time be like, oh yeah, you know, like that beef was delicious. I'm glad I got on my bowl, and I paid an extra two bucks for it. But then, like when they look at their credit card statement, they're going to be like, Frescoes not as affordable as I thought it was.

So, I want to make sure to have the perception of affordability always as well.

Dr. Black: But I did see your sign for families who are looking for affordable, healthy food, that now on Saturdays you have kids eat free. Is that

Chef: Yeah, we always have a kid's bowl available. It's 5 dollars and it's, a nice size little plate and they can pick anything that they want and put it on there.

Egg and avocado are still additional like they are on the regular menu. But on Saturdays all day, every Saturday. One free kids bowl with the purchase of an adult size bowl. So, we'd really like to encourage families to come in and it really makes me happy as a, as a dad to see kids sort of branching out and trying new things.

So that's really the goal when you're feeding your kids is to like, what can I expose them to just for expanding their palate, but also like that's good for them.

Dr. Black: That's great. Yeah. So, you heard it, Corridor Primary Care family. On Saturdays, you'll make Dr. Black happy. When you can come in, if you have an appointment with me on Monday, you can tell me all about your fresco bowl that you had on Saturday. I'll be there. I'll give you an extra sticker if you had a fresco bowl.

Well, that's about all the questions I have for you today. I really appreciate your time.

Chef: Yeah. It was a great conversation.

Dr. Black: And, yeah, I'm excited to get to know you more. And I hope that the community really sees that you don't have to just resort to fast food, especially with children. There's lots of great options here and Fresco's is definitely leading the way.

Chef: I appreciate it. And I think, maybe something that people don't know when they walk in the door is that we aren't a corporate restaurant. I mean, I put a lot of resources into making Fresco look like a national brand, but it is not.

It's born and raised in San Marcos by a human being who lives in the area and feeds his family from, owning this restaurant. So, supporting a local company is, is always

a great thing to do. And that money stays in the local economy and I think that's an important thing to remember.

Dr. Black: Very important. It's one more reason why we are San Marvelous. That's right. We have Fresco.

Chef: No doubt.

Dr. Black: Thank you. Yeah,

Chef: Yeah, nice talking to you.

Dr. Black: You too.

Well, I sure hope you enjoyed this episode.

I really enjoyed meeting Chef Silver and getting to know him a little bit better. I eat at Fresco pretty regularly, so come by sometime, check it out, maybe I'll see you there. Thanks for listening.

Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black: Episode 7 - A Chat with Andrew Silver of Fresco

In Episode 7 of 'Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black', Dr. Black chats with local chef and restaurant owner Andrew Silver of Fresco, based in San Marcos. The conversation reveals Silver's journey from Massachusetts to Texas, his experience in the restaurant industry, and the importance of offering nutritious, plant-based meals at his restaurant. Silver discusses the healthy food options, the philosophy and challenges of his business, and the new promotion - 'kids eat free Saturdays'. The podcast highlights the importance of supporting local businesses and dining experiences that prioritize health and taste.

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