

Elizabeth Schiffler, LiveWell Interview

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Elizabeth Schiffler

E Elizabeth Schiffler 00:00

When we help students and anyone who eats to understand how food is always a story, you know, we can kind of open up this new understanding that food is not a fixed substance. It's not a fixed art that we can always count on. It's very alive, just in the same way that a performance is always kind of alive and unknown.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:24

Hi, everyone, welcome back to the live well podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Wendy Slusser, Associate Vice Provost of the Seminole healthy campus initiative Center. I'm realizing that you may be wondering what does that title mean? Well, in two episodes from now, we're going to have a special behind the mic episode where my amazing Podcast Producer Kayleigh Ruller will interview me about my work with Semel HCI and more. Stay tuned for that. In the meantime, we have a truly fascinating episode for you today that embodies a very interdisciplinary approach to education and research that I think UCLA embraces, or as our guest today, Elizabeth Schaeffler calls it artistic research. Elizabeth Schaeffler is a PhD candidate at UCLA in theater and performance studies with a Food Studies graduate certificate. Her work focuses on understanding how food is used in and as performance and how artistic performances can be a new methodology for research. Today, we learn about her food performance workshops held in our very own UCLA teaching kitchen, and soon to be shared with students in the assembly halls of Los Angeles Unified School District. We also let you in on both of our favorite salts, which is very important educational information. But check out the show notes to learn more about Elizabeth and her work and enjoy the episode. And thanks for tuning in. Okay, welcome, Elizabeth. So happy to have you on this podcast as our guests, ever since I met you and our food stays Colloquium. I've found you as an original and inquisitive thinker who breaks the mold of what you might expect. Currently, you're a fourth year PhD student in theater, right? And you have a Food Studies Certificate. Did you always think that you'd be blending your interest between theater and something as concrete as food?

E Elizabeth Schiffler 02:31

L ELIZABETH SCHIFFLER 02:51

Such a great question. And thank you so much for having me here. I am honored. And yes, I agree those those that colloquium, those conversations started to open up really specific questions about the intersection of performance and food. But it did start before that class. I don't know if it was food specifically. But I've always been, you know, a begrudging theater kid. One of the reasons I think is I've always really been drawn to what storytelling can do, and how to engage an audience and bring people together around a shared experience. I always wanted to think bigger, and about the impact of what stories can do. And I think that also quickly got me into questions of politics and history and social questions of what is theater doing really broadly. Luckily, in my undergraduate career at University of Washington, I found a lot of homes for asking those questions. And in my final year of my undergraduate degree, I was introduced to the field of performance studies, which really takes the act of theater and puts it in a more critical context of trying to think about the social, historical and cultural implications of performance and what that means really broadly, we can think about kind of all of the ways that theater is a part of everyday life, like rituals or different kinds of practices that engage humans with the world. And and through that, I started to kind of think broadly about what performance is and how I can think about it. So I guess in some ways, yes, I've always wanted to think about the what's the something more about theater, which led to me not really wanting to do it practically. I studied theater design in my undergrad, and I was a practicing artist, and performance art and theater after my undergraduate experience, but I always was kind of trying to situate it more broadly. And so I think I always knew I was going to end up in academia with at least some bent of performance studies.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 04:34

So that has led you to your PhD thesis and your research that you're conducting, blending these two interests. And I really love to hear about how you are using artistic research, you know, what does that mean? And how are you translating that into your PhD?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 04:53

Artistic research is such a great question and sometimes contradictory and shows up in a couple different ways. Even just in in the academy, I think there's the one side, we can think about, you know, humanities departments, English theatre, visual arts, cinema media studies that are critically examining how art stories, film media affect our understandings of the world. And then there's the more kind of emerging question around can art and art practice, be a methodology be a way to explore questions that perhaps look similar to the way that a scientist might pose a research question. And that instead of going into one type of lab, maybe you go into a rehearsal room to ask those same questions, and you just materialize them in slightly different ways. One of the ways that it's showing up now is with my project through the sustainable la Grand Challenge. And that project is trying to ask the question of what is the role of creativity and storytelling in food systems work, in particular with food equity, and food and sustainability work. And so that's resulting in a cookbook, which happens to look a lot like a theatrical or film script, right? It's a prompt for your body to do certain things, to tell a story to make a creation, this happens to be some dishes. So we're exploring kind of how can a cookbook be also a creative practice? Really, my attention is a little bit while while those kind of nutrition and sustainable goals are still in mind, it's a little bit more close interrogation of what are the aesthetics and the forms and the media in which that's presented?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:40

And you're doing this in a teaching kitchen? As I understand it happening in the teaching kitchen?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 06:46

Yes. Teaching Kitchen is just such a great way to like put it all into the body, right? Like it's that's the performance we have, we have people picking up the book and cooking some recipes.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:56

So what I'm hearing with you, you're utilizing story as your method to deliver experience to the students. Is that correct?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 07:07

Yeah. I think it's story. I think it's, you know, if I'm getting really in the weeds, I think its performance. And performance always has story as an element. But there's also the space to consider, there's the senses to consider, there's the time it takes to consider right performance kind of deals with this whole, you know, if we want to think of it as like a pop up book, right, we can think of a cookbook as something that's flat on a page, and then performance, expands it into space. And it really kind of invites all of those elements of where are we sourcing the food? How are the students chopping the vegetables that we're going to be pickling? And then kind of broadly like, how does that affect all of our daily habits around food? And is that is that look at food, through the lens of performance, a way to intersect these ideas of Food Studies in the sciences, Food Studies in the humanities and Food Studies in the arts.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:01

You know, when I think of performance, I think of watching a performance or being the actors in the performance or the artists in the performance. This is the artists or the performers, are the ones also experiencing the performance. sounds redundant. But

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Elizabeth Schiffler 08:21

Absolutely! Well, it can feel a little kind of like we're spiraling in on itself. But we could also expand that out, right, we could think of any dining experience where there's a chef cooking for an audience like that maybe maps on more to what you're thinking of, and what your first idea of theater is. But then also, there's also many examples of theater and performance that's done within communities for the performers themselves. But it's an exciting way for, you know, students and anyone anytime we cook right to think about that we're creating something. But we're also consuming something at the same time. I'm even thinking to a conversation that we

had recently about how would we kind of think about mixed methodologies in the teaching kitchen, where we might evaluate someone's experience and understanding inspiration, or are these kinds of really intangible things that performance can allow for and invite. And, and it would be hard to do that in a space that didn't have that mix between creativity and storytelling of the cooking process and the eating process, but also the very kind of tangible material realities that the more kind of science based food studies work focuses on.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 09:36

So you keep talking about storytelling, which I think is a really important theme in general in terms of opening up empathy and understanding. And I know that you've been invited to do a translation of what you are doing for your PhD thesis to the LA Unified School District. And I wondered, what is it that you're going to do in that setting? Are you performing with the students or for the students?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 10:06

Great question. That's going to be bit more performing for with the partnership with LA Unified School District that's mediated through common threads, a national nonprofit that focuses on different types of educational experiences around cooking. The LAUSD is actually has a new initiative called the Farm to School initiative where they're going to be changing some of their sourcing for their food. And this is going to be communicated through an assembly. So this is another like point of communication. Storytelling is a really key point. So that assembly is going to be highlighting the three chefs that are in the cookbook, as culinary artists and storytellers who are who can tell the story. If any type of food system changes, it's going to look feel and taste a little different. And so how can you help students and I think this goes broadly to you know, anyone understanding that changing how we source food is going to have a different, you know, your pizza might not taste the same or, you know, the salad might look a little different. But there's a really compelling story as to why that matters.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 11:11

So this assembly, which is really a storytelling opportunity really lends itself to what a lot of your work is about, which is access centered, and you're creating access through I guess the modality of the of the story itself. I think that it's a really smart what you're doing and what common threads is proposing to do. Because, you know, many years ago, I was involved with the original change in the LA Unified School District food. And they didn't prepare the students or the families to the change in menu, and a lot of the changes had to be reverted back because people weren't prepared. So this work will be really critical to the acceptance and also the story about what it means to have locally sourced food just like you're describing.

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Elizabeth Schiffler 12:02

When you start sourcing from more local producers, you start looking more seasonally, like we run out of things, which means that the chefs have to do something creative, right, you might have to sub in and ingredient you might have to, you know, improvise a little bit all of these

very kind of theatrical or performance driven terms. And when we help students and anyone who eats to understand how food is always a story, you know, we can kind of open up this new understanding that food is not a fixed substance, it's not a fixed art that we can always count on. It's very alive, just in the same way that a performance is always kind of alive and unknown. All of those things kind of can get in the conversation a little easier without it feeling like there's this perfect or right way to do food. We don't have that yet. If we did, we wouldn't have all the problems we do. But I think it can ease us into having a more shared conversation about what our food is and what it can be. Well, you know,

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:59

you've referenced a lot about your PhD in your thesis. And for those that don't know about writing a PhD, you usually have a bunch of research questions. What are your main questions that you're trying to answer?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 13:11

So we've talked a lot about kind of the practical components, which is this cookbook and engaging with the community. There's part of my dissertation, which is a little bit more in critical theory and performance studies and in the field of new materialism. And so a lot of what I'm thinking about is how we kind of reconceptualize what it even means to be human, when we think about all of the things that we eat and and how artists are really kind of key points in opening up and dramatizing or making theatrical, those edible experiences. Another another kind of framework that I'm questioning is the term terroir. Are you familiar with this term?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 13:58

Why don't you explain it for our listeners?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 14:01

Yeah, so it's really commonly used in the wine and small a world which is this kind of concept that you can taste the place of production in a particular food item. It's now expanded to all sorts of regionally produced goods. Cheese's maple syrup, chocolate coffee, that idea that a particular environmental location imbues its qualities into a food product. And I think it's a really compelling framework to try and understand how we as humans relate to our food and have relationships with our food and therefore how we have relationships with our own selves and, and how do artists and theatre and performance experiences really help us expand our understanding of what tasting food even commercially produced what that taste is and means.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 15:03

Eating or experiencing food and watching other people experience food does have the capacity to change your relationship with that food, just even the experience of itself or watching others with the experience. You know, when you think about when you feed a child, a new piece of

food, often you have a airplane flying into their mouths, and that excites them and makes them interested in trying that food. I'll never forget my great aunt, she, I didn't like string beans. And we had, we were growing string beans at my family's ranch and we picked them I loved picking them, I just didn't like eating them. And so she had me try each string being a different way. One was salt, one with butter, you know, raw one cooked until I finally found what I kind of liked. But it was mostly because I was just getting so much attention from somebody else. That what you're describing is really, so playful and joyfu when you think about it.

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Elizabeth Schiffler 16:07

I think that's always a part of of what I'm trying to bring to the conversations around Food Studies is where his pleasure and play really central. But but right what can pleasure and play do to change our understandings of in our relationships to food. Because I think also in the same way, pleasure isn't neutrally isn't, isn't always a pro for some of our environmental or our health concerns. It doesn't necessarily mean it's an ethically better thing, if there's no pleasure or if there is pleasure. But it's more kind of another component in our analyzing of What food does and is sometimes when we just kind of have to go through the tasting experience to to go through this kind of performance of food to build our relationship to it. You know that I do tastings and the classes I teach here at UCLA. And last week with some students, we did a salt tasting, where we tried four different types of salt. And the final salt, I included was the salts that you will receive, if you ask for a little extra salt, you know, you want to put it on your sandwich or your salad, just give it a little judge at UCLA dining. Let me have them try it all. And unfortunately, the iodized salt, which has its own interesting, long history about why we have iodized salt in the US was, by far the least compelling and favorite in terms of taste. But how would you know if you couldn't compare things? So, you know, there's this other side of tasting as a really important experience when we think about how do we teach and learn about food.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 17:38

I love that salt tasting. I travel with a little baggie of Hawaiian salt. Okay, I'm so picky.

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Elizabeth Schiffler 17:47

I'm partial to Jacobson sea salt, which is produced up in the Oregon coast. That was one of the salts I brought into the students.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 17:57

Fantastic. I'll have to try that one. When I think about what you're talking about with food, I really do think that it's almost like a mindful exercise that you're expressing. And you mentioned, Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble*, which I wasn't aware of that I looked into it a little bit. And that in and of itself talks about, like that sort of consciousness of the other of the other living items on our planet, right and thinking about being conscious of all of it. And so how does that interplay with what you're working on?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 18:32

Yeah, that's a great question. Donna Haraway is such a fascinating scholar that I was handed this book staying with the travel by one of my professors, John Metzger at UCLA who said, I think you need to read this and develop your project a bit and, and I read it and yeah, but one of her main points in the book is how do we think about our many crises, and urgencies is what she calls it, not just in the Human Sphere, which there are many there, but also with the multiple species that we live with cohabit with and are reliant on. We know this in a lot of different ways. But one of the things that she really proposes in this book is this idea of play and collaboration at a really intimate level. And one of the examples that she gave is that eating human consumption is always a collaborative act, right? We know we have trillions of bacteria in our guts that are part of the consumption process. And so if eating isn't just about being human, then how do we think about our responsibilities? If we know that the things we think of us so human aren't actually that human to begin with? It's really meeting minds and really kind of opening up our methodologies and not assuming that, you know, that scientific methods don't have which we know don't have biases or their own stories around them. And so then could we open up kind of those questions to people who study stories? And who study performance? And how could we kind of like get in the weeds a bit about a new understanding of when we think about how do we take action against climate change or food insecurity? Who are we considering in those processes?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 20:24

That's lovely thinking, in relationship to her comments about holistically viewing the whole rather than just through us. In *Sapiens*, they talk about how stories are really what distinguishes humans from other groups. And I wonder if that's kind of egotistical of us. Maybe that's all wrong. Maybe we all have stories, maybe our, you know, microbiomes have stories that we don't know about.

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Elizabeth Schiffler 20:56

It's so true. That's why we need more research. We have to figure all that out. But I do think that kind of question of, does our ability to storytellers set us apart as humans? And I'm not sure if that's the question that I'm asking. And or if that's a dangerous question, or even I mean, a proposition to make, when we know that. Actually, I think our power does tell stories, whether it's unique to us or not, can be incredibly transformative, and incredibly dangerous. And something that Haraway says that I stick with is that she says the the figure of the thrombose, the figure of this human is worth staying with. So that's what her her book, staying with the trouble is kind of about, and that humans have caused a lot of trouble, especially, you know, through kind of capitalist, extractive colonialist, white supremacist logics. And that is a really large area of critical concern for me is what are those stories that we've also been telling about our food system for a long time that are causing a lot more harm than good? Those can still be, you know, powerful, effective, entertaining pleasurable stories for a certain population of people. And they can cause a lot of damage to other people to the planet to other species, regardless of how our stories make us unique or not. They're incredibly powerful and have tons of effects, tons and tons of effects. And that is worth staying with a little bit.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:33

Yeah, well, I know that research shows also, I mentioned before about it, building empathy. And in fact, in neuroscience literature, it actually is proven through MRI scans and everything else, how it pings those parts of your brain that are more prone to exhibit empathy in behaviors. I'm a big fan of storytelling in so many ways. And I'm wondering, can you give me an example of a story that is or promotes a truth that you're working on, and then a story that might not be so great.

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Elizabeth Schiffler 23:12

One story that I've been thinking with a lot is performance, which is a type of delivering of a story by the artists, Zina Saro-Wiwa, who lives here in Los Angeles, but is from the Niger Delta and lived a long time in London. And Zina produces gin from palm wine. She has her own distillery set up in the Niger Delta. And the story that she tells is one of kind of common western US conceptions of what Nigeria and Ogoni lands ecology is as one of devastation of kind of extraction of absence of loss, and tries to counteract that through taste. And so the audience begins the experience in silence, and you sip these really tiny, little bits of gin that are infused with different African botanicals, things that a lot of the audience, especially for a Los Angeles based audience might never have tasted before. And as you sit in silence, and you feel this kind of little burn through your whole body, and you have this pleasurable experience, also a little somber, because you're thinking about, you know, the ways that different inequitable structures have devastated certain ecologies. You also can't help but just be so grateful to have this moment and this experience of tasting something that you've never tasted before. And Zina lectures on spiritual and mindful ways of rethinking our relationship with food if we took all of these stories as part of it if we took the hard stories, and if we took the beautiful parts of eating and kind of all meditated and dealt with it a little bit more. And so that's one, one experience and one story that I keep coming back to, and her work just continues to inspire me. Now a story that's not so nice. So something that's kind of we've seen recently is an increase in certain farms and food producers that claim sustainability. And then it gets revealed that maybe their practices weren't actually such good relation with either the ecology or with people. Disney World has this ride called Living with the land, which is a ride that you go through, and you talk about hydroponics and different potential food futures. And then, of course, you step outside of this ride of kind of what could be done about the food system. And then we see kind of a really intense example of industrialized food, serving a lot of people that generates a lot of waste, and they're not unique, we know that this is the problem in most of us food consumption, and you don't have to be in a theme park to have that problem. But I think it's this really appealing story of what sustainability, sustainability should look like. It doesn't quite open up all the ways that we could enact good relations or change our relationships with other people, other species or the planet.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 26:28

Well, those those really are a juxtaposition are they. So in your research, or projects that you're doing what gives you hope about the world, and hope that we're going potentially in the right direction, or at least a more equitable direction?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 28:10

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Elizabeth Schiffler 26:48

I think collaboration is something that theater and performance is always all about, right? It's always about getting a number of factors in a room together and making something happen. And I think that that word circulates beyond theatre and performance. And it's been something that's been so important in my doctoral work, I think it's been true when I joined the Food Studies, colloquium class, and getting here and talking with you, and taking the time to really share our ideas and sit with things that don't always fit together nicely. I think I also see that with the students that I get to work with this ability to kind of not rely on a perfect answer and to kind of have to open up the story that we're going to tell about food as one that's multifaceted, and that we need a lot of people in the room. And that the more we collaborate, too, I think we're getting, I hope, I feel like we're getting better understanding who's not in those conversations, and who's absent and who needs to be included. And also, that that's going to compromise different types of knowledge, we're gonna have to change our models a little bit, some of the research we produce might look a little different. If we're going to factor in someone else's experience or a different type of knowledge.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:06

How do you come to terms with when there's a scarcity of food in your work, and especially for people who are food insecure, that might not be getting the foods that they want? Or are enough of the foods?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 28:22

The case studies that I look at in my research, often assume food is there, and there's a large reality of the world and for people's lived experience and food isn't their basic needs are essential critical of paramount importance for folks to not go hungry. And there's also been a history of artists, local chefs, people who prioritize feeding their community at whatever cost. And they can think creatively about how to get people food in times of need. And I think the their, their knowledge is something that I'm, I'm interested invested in and will point to as well, we definitely need government interventions we need we need resources we need, we need to reduce food insecurity on UCLA campus. We have a lot of interventions to make. And there's a lot of people who have been intervening in their communities for a long time. My question is, you know, are we learning from them? Are we talking to, you know, I think often about the history of the Black Panther Party and their interventions into food insecurity and that that social movement was linked to access around food. And are we modeling after that? are we forgetting that part of history? Lots of people aren't. But in certain conversations that can skew towards a certain type of objective understanding of how we intervene and things I think we have to remember that there's been a lot of different times in history that we've dealt with, that the individuals are or communities have dealt with food insecurity and what are we learning from them?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:05

Yeah, that gives you opportunity to tell the story, doesn't it?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 30:08

Exactly. Because history is also a story that is worth telling and kind of coming back to.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:14

That's right. And for those that don't know, the history, the Black Panther, they really started the breakfast program. And some of the lunch programs across the country. Right, things that we're, you know, still relying on even. I'm thinking of California's lunch universal lunch program for everybody. Amazing. Well, to end this wonderful conversation, I don't want it to end but I'm sure I'll learn more stories in the future coming from you. But what does it mean for you to live well?

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Elizabeth Schiffler 30:50

I'm always figuring it out. It always has to change a little. Right now, for me to live well. It's to watch the sunset. It's to water my new tomato plants outside, to go for a walk, and to continue to build community with unlikely partners.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:12

Okay, so I like that. So that's the change every day unlikely partners,

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Elizabeth Schiffler 31:19

You just never know. And it truly is that you never know. And it's a gift to be a doctoral student, where I am put into conversation with a lot of people, but and things and ideas and species and tastes. But you just never know who you're gonna end up working with thinking with. It's pretty exciting.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:41

Well, I hope that all of us can take that wisdom and be open to new experiences new people. Thank you so much. Students like Elizabeth give me a sense of excitement for not only the future of academia, but for the future school food programs, food literacy, and food education as a whole. Here's what I'm carrying with me from this episode. That concepts like foods that seem fixed are actually quite alive and must be understood through the context of their space, our senses, the time, the audience and the performance as Elizabeth says, I'm also feeling a pull to bring my mindfulness practices into my daily interactions with food. I love how Elizabeth has combined her expertise in theatre with her interest in food. It shows us that we don't have to limit ourselves to any one thing. Thanks for joining us today, each and every one of you. If you've been inspired by this episode, have ideas for new guests or want me Wendy to be a guest on your podcast. Visit our podcast page on our website healthy.ucla.edu To contact us, or

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