Just Eats
Episode 6: Re-Prioritizing Food with Joshna Maharaj

Shobhana: Welcome to Just Eats podcast! We're your hosts Shobhana Xavier and Courtney Szto. We're professors at Queen's University who do research around anti-racism and food. This podcast series explores food histories, futures, and sovereignty through conversations with Indigenous and racialized chefs, activists, and experts in Turtle Island or Canada. In this episode, we're talking about food access in different public sectors, such as food banks, hospitals, universities, and colleges.

Courtney: If you've ever had to stay in a hospital, what do you remember about the food that you were served? Was it tasty? What kind of options were available? Were there different textures to the food? If you think back to your days in high school or university, what kind of food was served there? Was it healthy? Colourful? Diverse? Exciting? If you have ever received food from, or volunteered at, a food bank, what do you know about the kind of food provided? Institutional food has been taken over by large corporations who usually find the cheapest way to fill our bellies, but this is not the most economical, sustainable, or even ethical way to serve those most vulnerable in our societies.

Shobhana: Joshna Maharaj is a chef, activist, culinary instructor, and author who knows all too well that healthy nourishing food is not usually served on a tray. She used to co-host the Hot Plate podcast and in 2018 received Restaurants Canada's Culinary Excellence Award. In 2020, she published her book, "*Take Back the Tray: Revolutionizing Food in Hospitals, Schools and other Institutions*." Joshna is currently a graduate student at the University of Dublin in the Gastronomy and Food Studies program. Before she left for Ireland to start her graduate journey, Joshna welcomed us into her home where we spent the day chatting, baking masala biscuits, and drinking chai. We would like to provide a content warning for listeners because there is a brief discussion of eating disorders during this interview as well the use of expletives. Please enjoy our conversation with Joshna Maharaj.

Shobhana: What's your story? How did this all happen?

Joshna: You're thinking like road to the kitchen?

Shobhana: Yeah.

Courtney: Oh, to like road to activist chef in particular.

Shobhana: And all the work that you do.

Joshna: That's really helpful because I actually was just watching Jamie Oliver plays...figures heavily in that story. And I was thinking about how, how much he has influenced my sense of what my job is. But really, like, when people ask me this question, what they want I see is some story about how I sat at my mother's feet, with some spice goddess nonsense, right. And that's definitely not the case. However, I

will say, it is like, it's important to note that I am also the oldest female child in an Indian family. So there's no way I was escaping the kitchen, right? But my job was like to go get things from the basement and do the dishes. And occasionally chop a few onions or mix something or washable for some, you know, for my mom and my aunties. So I just observed what I felt was their sort of magical alchemy, right? I learned how to cook, put pasta together. You know what I mean? Just not Indian food. Indian food was always like this magical thing that my aunties and my mom knew how to do and I...

Shobhana: Why was this magical?

Joshna: Because it was all like, they just seem to know how much of all these different powders was required depending on what we were cooking.

Courtney: No recipe.

Joshna: Right? And everything it was everything was gauged by sense measure. Right, nobody measured anything. Occasionally, like when you're cooking rice, you know, I mean, we have a little "Okay, okay. Okay, and this much water and fine." But it like that was super fascinating. It was like they had a wisdom from someplace else. And I remember thinking to myself and wondering when I was gonna get it. You know, like, is this just like a download? [laughing] Right? And some sort of soft? Like, what's gonna happen? Is it when I got married? Is my mom gonna teach me? Because it didn't feel like she was lining up for too much of that, right? And so I was like, "Oh, when is this gonna happen?" So, so anyhow, that was it. And then I went to, I bookended my university career with trips to India. So important connection in my family, Indian but South African. For now, like six, seven generations. So I was born in South Africa and then moved here when I was very little.

Shobhana: Oh, wow.

Joshna: So that is like…my Indianness has a filter. Right? Which I think shows up most on the plate. Right our African-Indian food is a bit of a different vibe of a thing and very distinctive, if you know what you're looking for. And like culturally, there was always just we always understood that we were separate from the mainland, right. I was laughing because I realizing these hilarious names that you come up with people that we Indian people from India that we would meet we call them in our family be like all "they're India Indians," with the raised eyebrows, India Indian. Because we kind of fundamentally didn't understand each other, right.

Shobhana: Right.

Joshna: They didn't understand the story about the Indian's who went someplace else. And we, I think had a bit of an inferiority complex, about how legit our Brownness was right? In their assessment. So I went to India, trying to fill that hole in my history.

Shobhana: To find your roots…

Joshna: Because it's so clear – the African identity is invisible. I'm an Indian person, clearly**.** All I wear is my Indian identity. And when I'm here, you do not…you're not as grateful as perhaps you could be in all of this. Yeah, yeah, exactly. And that's a difficult thing. I haven't. I do believe that, like, some version of this is like what V.S. Naipaul was writing about. You know what I mean? I think that I am, I am one in a continuum of diaspora immigrants who have, you know what I mean, who are little bits of things to, you know, cobble together. But that is a complication. Because sometimes India's amazing, sometimes India is so frustrating.

Shobhana: Yeah.

Joshna: Right. Yes, those are my people. But that's not my place. It's clearly not my place. I'm a visitor there. And it's like, it's like, it's like, yo it's cool. So, but my second trip? Well, no, the first trip got me excited enough about religion and spirituality, that I decided to do a degree in religion.

Shobhana: Yeah.

Joshna: Right. And everyone was like, what? You want to be a nun?

Shobhana: Right, of course.

Joshna: I'm sure your aware,

Shobhana: Yeah, all my life!

Joshna: When I was living, I was always living in an Ashram in the mountains, both times, and the second time, there was actually a course of young Brahmacharya/Brahmacharnis' doing their bit. It was all in Hindi, and so my Hindi wasn't good enough to listen to Vedic lectures, right. So I was just living there. But I thought about it a lot. I was like, I love the study. Right? And the like, the way Hindu philosophy sets it up, there's a vastness right that is that is super exciting. And it's really compelling and I was like, maybe get lost in that for the rest of my life. Yeah, maybe that's interesting in some service, I'm very happy volunteer… like I could do this. But ultimately, no, ultimately the verdict was go out there and do the household do it all. You know what I mean? Figure that out that way and do all of, I keep all that alive but use it out there in the world. Don't lock yourself in an ashram because you have things. Swamiji was like, "you have things to do." Like, alright, cool. But in that time, I was eating mangoes and going for walks. And that was it. But then the aunties who worked in the kitchen, were like, who? What? What is what? I was 24. Tick tock already. Like, who..."Do you know how to cook?" I had to say no, because they weren't excited about my chickpea pasta. And my chickpea tuna, one thing.

So the answer was no, I did not know how to cook. And they were like, what? "Who are your parents? Who are your insane parents?"

Shobhana: 100%.

Joshna: Right, who just sent you off? Right?! Twice! Because they remembered me from five years before.

Courtney: Like you still don't know how to cook?

Joshna: So, they literally, in that moment, dragged me into the kitchen and put me to work making chapatis. And I did their work that night. And they sat there watching my rolling and my toasting on the… on the flame, like prospective, mothers-in-law, right, determining what my two chapatis will let them know whether I would be a good fit for their sons. And like I was kneading dough down on my haunches, right, because it was this massive thali and we had to make chapatis for like 80 people. And so that was the story. And I gotta tell you, in that process, and like it's important to note, Ashram kitchen, is barefoot, cross legged, on the floor, chopping things in your lap.

Shobhana: Or in your hand.

Joshna: Right. Exactly. That little green pattern with the onions at all right? Yeah, it was there's no steel toed anything. There's no boards. There's no crisp white right?

Shobhana: Yeah.

Joshna: The grinder for the chutneys were literally two stones and a little spigot. Real, is amazing. Right? We wash the dishes with fire ash. All of it.

Shobhana: Yeah with fire…

Joshna: Right. Yeah, all of it, all of it. Boat oars for the big times when the massive pots of stuff were being stirred. And I was like, "This is amazing. I love.." And then then I remember I was chopping tomatoes. And the like, the apparatus that they have is so smart. You sit cross legged. And there's a big bowl, right that's about this deep, with a slight flare, right? And so, it… the curve of your shins, as you're seeing it – it fits perfectly. Right, it fits perfectly. So even if you get a cramp, you can wrap your legs around that. I mean, it's perfect. Then you have a plank that's about this wide, and just longer than the diameter of the bowl. Okay, that's sort of sitting just resting on top. Then at the front, in the space, in the bowl, are the whole tomatoes, right. And I have a paring knife in my hand, I pull up a tomato, chop, and then I just push it to the back. Right, right. And I was like…and I'm sitting down. And cases of tomatoes I went through, right. Where they were teasing me for not knowing Hindi and all the all the fun

like…I'm I am this could be this is a real job. Yeah, this is someone's real job. I could do this. Because for sure my religious studies degree had no job. Right, there's no job. And I didn't care about anything enough to do a Master's at that point.

Shobhana: Right, right. Yeah,

Joshna: I was like, I know enough about everything. I don't need to do this. My mom was very impressed. And it was super nice to take that out and serve the people.

Shobhana: Exactly.

Joshna: So it was cool to be on the other side. But like, I did have two important realizations in that kitchen. One was, I watched the days when the cook/the boss was in, Balwant was his name. And if he was in a bad mood, and he'd come into the kitchen and start banging things around, you know what I mean, and being cranky and yelling at people and stuff. We all got cranky, right? That was in fact, it was contagious. And that snarliness would also go right into the food. Right? And I would watch us, and it like it was I remember, it was literally just *dal* and some *mooli sabji* and rice and rotis. That was… that was it. But everybody had some of that *dal* that day. And I watched like, I watched the indigestion. You know what I mean? Breeze across the whole crowd. Everybody left a little a little off and crusty, right? They got to taste a Balwant's snarl and that one night, I was like, huh. And then flipside of the story, if he would come into work after just having seen his girlfriend. Right, and he had a little...

Shobhana: Right, right?

Joshna: We'd be singing in the kitchen and dancing around and joking about this and that. And I would see that get dished out to everybody. You know what I mean? People who were…crustier people would come by to tell us how delicious the food was, or to tell some funny little joke about people who eat too much Mirchi with their beer or whatever funny little thing. Yeah, I thought to myself, and like these are people whose job it is to manage their emotional state. Right? Brahmacharya, the nuns and monks: their job is to manage themselves. So, if they are susceptible to this, this is a universal, like this is an everywhere thing. And then like I think, a couple of years after I came home from India, I watched *Like Water for Chocolate*, which is all about this, you know this story in this movie? oh my god. So it's Mexican story, was a book that became a movie. Mexican family, two daughters, three daughters maybe. The second daughter falls in love with this boy and desperately loves him and wants to marry him. But the custom in the family is such that the second daughter cannot marry unless the first daughter is married. But if only they left it there, they did not leave it there. And what they did was they forced the boyfriend of the second daughter to marry the older sister. And this younger sister had to cook the wedding food. So there is this scene where she's making this quail with rose petals for the feast of the…and her tears drop into the stew because it's her beloved. But then when she serves it, people start leaving the table in tears. And everybody, you know what I mean? And it's all this big disaster. Then I

think she and the potential brother-in-law find themselves in a closet somewhere. Somethings happen, like they have a little stolen moment.

Shobhana: Yeah, yeah

Joshna: And so she's flushed with it. Right? And she's making another dish with all her lustiness and people pair up and leave the table after they taste it. Right? It's very, the notion that your energetic state imbues into the food. And I remember sitting there thinking "Look at what just happened here." And I love…I was like, it's like incredible because like this, you can have exponential impact on people. You just need the biggest pot. Right? But that's it. But also on days, like the swami who was, you know, sort of the founder of the whole thing, on his birthday, they would have a big community feast and feed as many people as could show up for food. But they would start the cooking a week ahead. And the special priest who would come and do poojas and build firepits and rub the cow dung on the bottom, and poojas to ensure the successful efforts with this volume. Cause you know, because these pots, we could jump into these pots, they're massive things. And I remember thinking to myself, "This is, I love, I love everything about this. I love this so much." And so like I sent a proclamation home to my parents, that I was to be a chef, and this was my plan.

Shobhana: Wow!

Joshna: And they were not interested at all. And they were like this is more airy-fairy nonsense. It's time for you to be serious and come up with a real plan. They're like, you know, basically, they're like, "we were cool with the Religious Studies and Women's Studies". Right! But uh…

Courtney: That's already too like Bohemian!

Joshna: Tick tock, right. Exactly, exactly so that I wrote back and argued my case in an essay, because I just finished university. I could whip out a hamburger paragraph, three argument essay, no problem. So I wrote, right, and I wrote it all down. Uh I was like, I'm here and like, my last one was like, "I really feel like this is my destiny." And your parents can't really argue with that... Right? And so they were like, "Alright, fine."

I easily could have been a solicitor, it's really the truth. So then I like did George Brown's first online application, with the limited access of dial up internet connection that we had up there in Himachal and then came home and went to cooking school. And there it is. I mean, what's amazing is to see how little has changed since I was a student. And now I'm an instructor. More pointedly, what I'm suggesting is that, like, the placements and the connections, and the opportunities into the industry, are not nearly as robust as they should be. Never mind, what perhaps they should be for 85% international student faculty, right, this? That's, yeah, it's a bit. This is the same stupid story that you were playing 22 years ago when I graduated from this school. Right. And the biggest problem is that I dangled their 98%

placement rate in front of my parents. That's what got them to give me the green light for me to actually say, "no, no, you think this is airy-fairy nonsense, but there's a job at the end of this." There's employment, and there very much was not. Right, very much was not and they were they just shook their heads for a long time. For like, almost another decade, if you can imagine. There's only 2011. 2011 I did my first TED Talk. And Ted, at that time, they did these like teaser videos for the speakers. And they did they decided they were just funny videos, which are like just portions of our faces. Right? So it's like my ear, and then my mouth. And then the final was my whole face talking about and I was talking about hospital food or something like that. So when the video came out, I emailed it to them, and I was like, this is big. And separately, they both emailed me back, saying, "Okay, I guess this was a good idea." And it was so sweet that for them both of them unbeknownst to each other, that was like an arrivals level. Right? That she's doing a TED talk, whatever she did was good enough to get her chosen.

Shobhana: These parts of her face.

Joshna: Right, and they were like, "Okay Joshna, I guess good for, I guess this was a good move," which was super cute. I was like, "you know that the other one, do you know that you both…" which is very sweet. So that was it. I mean, what has grown from there has been, in this period when I was like, there's no placement, right, I left culinary school knowing completely what I wanted nothing to do with. Right, which is this very formalized restaurant culture. There's no room for my feel good, Ashram bullshit. Right.

Courtney: You need to be in a good way to cook.

Joshna: Right. Nobody cared, right? Nobody can plus the like the sexual harassment from instructors, like it was such an easy regular part of the custom and the practice there, right? So much so that they legitimated in their minds. I think these dudes that this is how they were preparing us for the realities of the industry. Right, by giving us a taste of it in school. So that the girls, because there was like one there were like 30 something dudes in my section and three women. Me and one Black woman, only people who are not White in all like seven cohorts. And I was like, like, I remember I was making a zabaglione, right, which is a little Italian egg custard. And you have to whisk those yolks over a steam bath until you get to the ribbon stage, which is beautiful thing. And it takes a while when I do it here with three yolks. But I had 36 yolks in the bowl, and this massive whisk and this big giant bowl and like my you know, I mean, that was trading off between arms. Right, delicate, and then you fold whipped cream into it and that went on top of berries or some nice thing for dessert.

And so the chef came by to test my zabaglione to see the ribbon. It has to fall back on itself really nicely. And he I was like folding delicately. You know what I mean? And he grabbed his giant whisk, and just like aggressively, and I was like, "Chef, what are you doing? I worked so hard to lighten that up." And as he's given it with this big whisk and deflating all of my right he looks at me and he says, "I'm just treating her like a lady." And I was, I actually smacked him. I couldn't help myself. I was like, I need a

timeout. I need to walk away. Not only are you ruining, like, what mark are you gonna give me now? After all of this, right, and so like, you're gonna taste my frustration at having to wade through that bullshit to make dessert. I'm like, I just want to make dessert. Why do I have to deal with this? Right? Do I want to work someplace? Am I going to choose this? It did not feel right. But unfortunately, that put me right back at ground…at square one. But now I had this certificate.

Shobhana: Yeah.

Joshna: Cool. But like, where? What kitchen doesn't have this culture? And this was 2001, 2002? And so my parents were like…

Shobhana: We told you, yeah, yeah

Joshna: Right. Well, the reality of the snakes and ladders, that was my life. There, the game of snakes and ladders. That was my life. So one thing led to the next. I left and I started searching out opportunities. And I got a job working at Dish Cooking Studio, which was just sort of Spadina and Dupont. And I was the early morning pastry sandwich cook. I get there early morning, make the scones and the muffins and sandwiches, soup, salads, every day. And that was like, I was like, I love everything about this, right? I loved all of it. And there was catering. And they taught cooking classes. And so I spent a lot of time there and tried my hand at teaching. And that is when I was like, oh I love this.

Shobhana: Aww

Joshna: This is good. And I realized that maybe my magic was not so much in cooking people a plate of food but teaching them how to do it for themselves. Right, I'm like aha! That's what I do. Other people will cook in restaurants because the idea is standing in the same place over and over making the same expensive plates. It's not for me. I love it. I love going to a restaurant. I love all of it. But that's not how I'm going to, that's not how these hands are going to be used, right? Then, when I was at Dish, the lovely people at The Stop, came for an event, some fundraiser or something. And I was asked to assist and I learned about The Stop and what they do – they're a community food center. Essentially just really awesome, grassroots community, food security work in the west end here. One thing led to the next they were looking for a chef, and they originally asked me to help them with the hiring right? Because they didn't feel like they could understand the social context. But how do they vet somebody's cooking skills? So they asked me as a chef to come in and ask these questions and so we interviewed like three or four people and every…they were all lovely candidates but nobody had both. Everybody had one or the other. I mean was like solid, large quantity production, but with no understanding about the social context of doing that work. And then other people were just like, perhaps volunteers who had moved up the ranks. But without the solid kitchen knowledge of how to really crank out lunch for 250 constantly, right? And then the executive director, Nick, we, this conundrum persisted, and he was like, "why don't you? Why don't you take this job? What's wrong?" Right. And then I thought about it. And I looked at

the numbers, and I realized that it was actually… compared to cooking jobs…because it was technically a job in a nonprofit. It was a really great job. There was a good salary benefits, vacation pay, security. I was like, I don't think many of my chef colleagues otherwise in the city had this. So I took the job. Right?

I just started cooking lunch. But it was all donated ingredients like in Second Harvest and Daily Bread. And it was like, that was, I was thrust into that whole world. Right. I was a bleeding heart volunteer. You know what I mean, ready to be as helpful as I could. But I had no idea, no idea about really what was going on, and what circumstances were for people living with poverty. And how everybody gets there. And of course, how close we all are being there ourselves. And about how like, just the politics around food banks, right, and how it's unavoidable. It's like, we want to see the end. But we can't, like we can't shut them down, because it's about people eating every day or not eating at all right, like. And then there's another voice, right, this was stronger academic activist voice, saying that all food banks should just be shuttered. And that all that effort and energy and resources should be put towards lobbying for policy change. Right for general GBI or whatever else it has to be. Which like, sometimes I think that that concerted effort might be more helpful than the toss your cans in a box on Thanksgiving game that we're playing right now. Right? It might be more startling because as long as needs are being met, mostly, there's no fire underneath anybody, you know what I mean? But if we saw more lines of desperate looking people occupying our space, or you know what I mean, our cities, maybe, you know, maybe, maybe these organizations are doing too good a job at meeting this need, because they care so desperately about the folks and about making, you know, helping. It's a really tricky piece. But what we did notice was that because I was a chef, I could do better things with the very humble ingredients that we had to work with. Right. And we could use our agency as an organization to refuse things that did not meet our standards. Because as you know, Daily Bread and Second Harvest, take a lot of…they rescue a lot of food from grocery stores, who used this lever as the tax credit, but they also use it as a dumping ground for products that don't fly. Right. So we got like cases and cases, skids of square bagels.

Courtney: Which is hilarious.

Joshna: Right, with the notion that somehow it fits more effectively into a toaster. Nothing wrong with a round bagel. Yeah. Right. And but the square bagels, nonsense, stupid things. Cotton candy flavored pudding.

Shobhana: Right

Joshna: Right. Tons and tons of cases of pop. And we never took one. One. We took one leg case of soda water once and then we put it in the staff kitchen. But we never ever ever took that stuff. And it's interesting, right? Because there's kind of like there would have the some of the drivers would be a little affronted at the notion that we would refuse anything. Right? Because hungry people. Yeah, like the

notion that hungry people can subsist on high fructose corn syrup. Right? Like that's, it's too easy. It's way too easy for us to think that we are solving a problem this way. Right? In fact, we're just creating a bigger one.

Courtney and Shobhana: Yeah.

Joshna: So we, on behalf of the community, would refuse to take things and then it got super sweet because the drivers got to know that there was a chef and so sometimes there would be like a really nice bottle of olive oil. Or he'd be like "Chef, see these mushrooms." It was super cute or like a little hunk of cheese. There was just one thing you know what I mean? It wasn't necessarily enough to go out in the food bank, but he was like, I had a feeling you would like this."

Shobhana: I love that.

Joshna: And I was like "Pasta for everybody, tomorrow! This is gonna be great!" It was a real sweetness, right? So me and the food bank coordinator would go out to the truck. I would take stuff to the kitchen he would take stuff to the food bank. But we were able to make homemade salad dressings and put a salad, a fresh salad on one quarter of that plate. That became the new mandate right. And soon I started begging for a little bit of a budget to buy the greens. Right, I said the other little bits of produce can be all the other things. And I had red wine vinegar and canola oil. And we taught everybody how to make simple, simple, easy vinaigrettes. Because we got the buckets of this stuff. It was be would be like, light raspberry vinegarette. You know what I mean? And in this four-liter bucket, and the stuff just like sizzles on your tongue when you eat it. And I managed to get my hands on, like, well grown organic lettuce, and I'm like, I'm not gonna put that on this beautiful invite, right? Because the other piece was, I have to convince these folks to eat the salad. These are not people -- they're not a salad eating population. Right, I got to dress this salad up. And I cannot, right, I cannot let the salad go down because of the shitty vinaigrette that I've got here, right? I have to, right, but just the notion that the plate is that loaded, right? And that it just, it's just supposed to be lunch, right? It's supposed to be just as simple, kindly offered well intentioned plate of food. But there was strategy because I knew what it meant, right? Because I would also stand in front of the green bin at the end of the meals and see the truth of how everybody liked the meal and what was happening. Because I needed to know was this too sour? Everyone's too polite to tell me that it was to, please tell me that it's too sour like I will change you know, I will shift and I will adjust. And so many times the salads and I was and so then I started guilting people. And I was like, you know, and I was like and I said to the dining room staff. I was like, "Can we put like the photos of the farmers who grew the lettuce on the side of the flap of the green bin"

Shobhana: Such an auntie move.

Joshna: These happy smiley face with these greens, Right? Or maybe a photo of how much these greens cost in the grocery store. Like, I was like, uh-uh, this is crazy what's going on. But it was super great. It

was I loved, like I honestly I did that job for five years. And I often thought that that was the best job I ever had. Right? I loved that job. I loved cooking those lunches. I loved figuring it out. Because every day was, I never planned meals. Right? It was always like what maybe a day before I'd probably be like okay…and I'd stop at No Frills and buy a little some extra potatoes or ground beef or something like that right. Cheese usually, because we never had things like that. And it was marvelous, and volunteers, and the music and everybody knew we were doing whatever we were doing, but noon was coming. You know what I mean? Whatever happened, noon we had to, right, it was it was the best. I loved it. I loved, it really... And during that time is when a like, my time at The Stop umbrellaed over moments like the release of Michael Pollan's book of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, right. And all of those big moments, these big giant books and these huge ideas about the reality of the food system that emerged were all while I was there. And the coolest thing I mean, I say cool. Retrospectively, I didn't think I understood it was more of a sort of difficult challenge, then was to advocate for the vulnerable community that we served with the notion that if we are at a place where we're going to rethink our food system, the new version has got to exist for everybody, not just those who can afford it. Right. And it was this, there was always a tension between our pushing notions of local organic eating, and what we could afford to put on the plates. It became insulting to suggest to somebody who barely gets one meal of anything a day, that they should be chasing organic food, like how dare you, right? How dare you. And I like that I was really grateful for that perspective. And for that lesson, because I could have easily rode off on my organic horse into the sunset, you know what I mean? Not understanding what a barrier it is. And like on the other side of things that when I was living in India, and we go and buy the vegetables in Dharam, so we're going to Dharamshala to buy the vegetables, and it was just lovely scenario where you just point and say a few things and then they delivered. It was just there when we get that like you know they just deliver it. But I realized I was like wait; this is all local organic food. But just because the technology of pesticides has not reached here yet. Right?

Courtney: It didn't come from a Whole Foods.

Joshna: That's exactly, nor did it come from any sort of intentional farmer's co-op. This is just growing, just never has never involved chemicals. And hopefully it will never involve chemicals in that in that village context. Right. And the important thing there is that everybody on this planet should be eating food that was not sprayed with a blanket of petrochemicals, and that was grown in the ground around where they live. Everybody, every single human person should be eating like that. Right? But we all understand the systems that exist to stand in the way of all of that. And so when we advocate for things like this, while yes, culturally it has spun out with madness with you know, my child will only Driscoll's blueberry. That is not a real thing. You will only let your child eat Driscoll blueberries, don't hide behind your baby. Because it's inconvenient. Right? Yeah, it's too much. And we still have the phenomenon of having organic farms that are still monoculture, exploitative labour environments. Yes, maybe not a blanket of chemicals, but they're growing way too many acres of one thing, and there's no bathroom, and the contamination, and the folks and the Mexicans. Right. It's, there's who cares? The fact that there's no chemicals on the leaf is the least of your worries, sometimes, right? When you think about all the other

things involved. And so I loved it really felt at the time, like, I had a bunch of colleagues and everybody sort of ran different programs, right. And I, the lesson that I take with me so much, from my time at The Stop was that when hunger hits a life, it has like a domino effect and everything comes tumbling down. So really effective supports need to be just as holistic, right? To build everything back up again, yes, people need to eat at least once a day, ideally, three times a day, right? So dining program, and a food bank had to be there, right. We had to get this. But then I ran a community kitchen program. So when people could come in cook together and then take some food home. We had an urban agriculture program and beautiful gardens and a greenhouse like all kinds of lovely food that we were able to hand to people in the food bank, right. We were able to actually put bags of organic tomatoes in those hampers, which was a massive deal. It's a massive deal in general. But in 2008, 2007, it was huge deal, right?

The whole community is what is required. We're not going to solve the problem by simply just putting better food on the plate. Yes, that's where we'll start. For sure, because that's the loudest, squeakiest wheel, right. But there, I was, like, ah there's more here. And if we're in a place where we want to rethink this, we have to be very, like the most vulnerable people are going to need advocacy. And that is our job. Right? And this team was amazing. We are some, we're all actually still very good friends. Hardly any, I don't think anybody is still working there anymore. Mostly because you can't, like have babies with that salary. And you know, like that it tops out at like 40 grand. And there's the no growth potential, as I'm sure you know, nonprofits don't exist, and pretty much, but we were all so committed to figuring this out. But we really like, it was super clear to us that there was a way through here. Right? Where like we've created it's happening, right? And it's super clear that when you offer people that many ways to engage, they actually can, we actually watched people lift themselves out of a life of poverty, get a job, build some skills, get a little job in a butcher shop, or a kitchen somewhere or you know what I mean? Mopping floors, whatever it had to be.

But like the biggest lesson was that if I can pull this off at The Stop, there's no way a hospital can't. Right? That was the because…at the end of it, all my lunches cost $1.85 for food. Right. And we were almost hardly using any donations at that point. Because I was like this food is…we need the advocacy to complain about this shitty food. And about the notion that this is for that any human should be eating this food problem, right? This is not okay. So thankfully, we pushed back and we got it. But this is what I was talking my first hospital project. I said I'm working on $1.85 plates and a quarter of that is local organic salad. And they were like, "Oh, well, that fits" with the shitty hospital budgets. And I was like, "Okay, I don't know, like, I don't think it should," right. But if there's an opportunity now for us to learn something from each other, and for me to transfer these skills, then we're going to do that that's very exciting. Because they had, they had about $2 and something for the food ingredients, for those meals, which is still way too little. But if now I have a precedent that I fed people an overflowing plate full of food, right? Because the servers were very generous. And it was constantly this battle between front of house and back if I was because they wanted to cram the plates. And I was like, hey, we have a budget. We need 200 portions out of it. Slow down. Right, we would do that compared to what was on a hospital

tray, which was all just like weirdly packaged processed industrial food for like, $2.35. And I was like, I can do better things with that $2.35. Let the record show I should have $3. But if this is where we are, this what we're doing, I'll show you what I can do for you today.

Courtney: Yeah, I think you outline in your book very well, what your, what is possible, with... And like being a chef is what makes that possible as well because you know how to make the ingredients go and extend it and make something delicious, which is really what is kind of fundamental to, like foundational of what comes off of that. What do you think...here do you think this logic for shitty food, like, we're just going to feed people, it doesn't matter what they eat, as long as people eat, that's fine. Do you think that's purely a logic of capitalism? Do you think it's also like a Western ideology or something else? Like, where do you think…

Joshna: I think capitalism for sure, is there? But I don't think it's the primary piece, I actually think that what's happening in institutions is a microcosm of our bigger disconnection from our food. Right? It's just the institutional thing that has been left to the last is arguably the messiest bit and untangling it is the biggest effort, right? We have deep collectively de-prioritized our food. Right? And we know like when I mean Michael Pollan sort of explaining all the reasons why post-war, all this kind of stuff. But the legacy of that really persists. Right? And so we collectively don't think food is important. And so that transmits into how institutions are run. Because all of my projects, I have required a sympathetic or informed or impassioned values laden person in the C suite office to hold the door open for me. Right. And I know this because the minute they leave the project dies, right? Because it's, it's a coincidental value, not a core organizational institutional value. And that is the piece I'd be like, "Oh, once she leaves, nobody else around here cares about food." And nobody else is going to tolerate me, which is exactly what happened at Ryerson, then Ryerson anyhow. That was that's really the piece. So our collective understanding about the role that food plays in nurturing somebody's life is not clear. Right? We don't understand it, and therefore we don't value it. And so it's my assertion, that because food has never been a priority, when the push for trimming budgets comes, food is perpetually on that chopping block.

Courtney: It's like the last thing they want.

Joshna: Right? It's the nobody cares, right? So that we push past I think that put in the book that like asking West Canada brand to get 14 slices out of a loaf, instead of 10. And taking the three cent Mrs. Dash packet off because that is the legitimate savings. Right? It literally costs three cents for that stupid little salt free thing. Right, and they're taking it off now because this, and...like it's the madness of this, the fact that it's just about the lowest, the lowest cost for reasonably edible food. Dieticians have been compromised to accept things that are nutritionally adequate, as opposed to what they actually should be eating. And that's like…and then that is how it exists. Yet 40% of the food that goes on those trays just takes a long road to landfill. So if that wasn't the case, I might not be that angry. Right. And people like the think tanks at the University of Guelph. Every year. They publish a piece talking about how hospital

patients are chronically malnourished populations. Right two hot indicators: 40% tray waste and chronic malnourished, like it's not working.

Shobhana: At the time we interviewed Joshna, she was teaching at George Brown and our conversation also focused on the exploitation of international students in higher education, like in college and university.

Joshna: One of my colleagues and I, had been thinking of lobbying the George Brown administration to do a block out from 12-1pm.

Courtney: So that they could eat.

Joshna: So that…no classes, just lunch. Part of my work with the administration at George Brown is they're telling me all about the Snap Student Nutrition Assistance Program, which is what they've got. Essentially, it's a central campus food bank. And I was pushing back telling them I was like, "Y'all just cashing the cheques here, but these kids are struggling. And what I need is some culturally appropriate food hampers. I need bags of dal and rice and masala and onions. And then let's think about the Southeast Asian kids and the Latinx kids. Now we have here too, because they're going to need this as well. Overwhelmingly the Indians, so we'll deal with them first. Fine, right. But I say to them, I'm like, "This is great. Thank you for the money for this because it's an emergency and they need this. But I really want you to know that you cannot boast about this while simultaneously having gutted and outsourced campus food service. This is the role of campus food service. And I would love it if you could invest the same resources. Why is there this money to buy these emergency food hampers, but no money to invest in opening kitchens up for more wholesome meal prep? You know what? How are you? What are you doing? You know, it makes me so furious that they're so boastful. I'm like, this is the food bank model. Can't you see? Have you read the messages from the guy the head of Daily Bread Food Bank about how this is the time a ticking bomb waiting to explode? It seems insane. That the classrooms in the chef school have all of these signs about how no food or drink is permitted

Courtney: That's hilarious!

Joshna: We're in the Chef School! Like, if you want to embrace innovation, right, this is this is part of it. Then show, I need you to be cool with the fact that you're write off the $150 that I spend at the farmers market with no receipt? Yeah. Be cool with this, somehow, right? Be cool with this. Because this is the opportunity that we get, right? We shop at the market; we introduce them to our people. And we buy things, but we buy like a bottle of maple syrup, a hunk of cheese, a pile of vegetables, and then I take a kitchen kit, because we're out of the park or wherever the market is. And then we just put a plate together with little bits of everything. And it's delicious. And they get a little paper cup shot of maple syrup. You know what I mean? The nice dark beautiful stuff. And it's super great. And then we say how much do you think we spent? Right? Because we want to dispel the myth that farmers markets are just

elitist spaces. For expensive loaves of bread and pots of honey. To some degree they are. But they don't have to be. Right, because invariably we spend like $115 divided by the 20 something students. It's like $6.75 each. And I said that's less than almost every entree on campus with services, right? And look at what you're eating. Yeah. And I said, and like, we introduced you to all of the people who produce all. You like, you know what I mean. Not only are you eating this food, and it's good for like it's locally grown. Most of it is actually organic, but you actually know the names of all of the people who grew that; we just met them.

Joshna: You would utilize like, literally $6.75 is what we spent, you would never get a plate of food like this campus food services for $6.75. I said, but remember, everybody who touches that food has gotten paid fairly for their work. Right, including me. Right, including, and the work study student, who we have a long to help us out. Right? I want you to see, but I'm bringing this up. Because after they go to the market, we get them to write a reflection paper just to tell us what their relationship with food is. You know what I mean? Just so we have where are they at? Are they come from a household where this was a big deal? Or are they all just microwaving their own things and eating in their room? Like what's the story, right? But the thing that is overwhelming. This is now, we've taught this class eight times over 10 or 12 years, from all of the female students, when it's usually like 90% of the class is female students, will write to us, will write something about disordered eating. Something to some degree, and just put them down and take a moment to be like this just to see how rampant and how woven deep…because it's like watching their mom's behaviors or hearing some shame from a camp counsellor like some random stupid thing that has made it in their mind and now permanently stuck in there. Right. And this got really important for us because we're like we have to address this right. While still remaining confident like the confidentiality of the assignment submission and that sort of thing.

But it's so now what has grown from that is the final classes is a potluck where they, did all their lessons, and again, the financial office has to be cool with the fact that I flip each student a 20. Each student gets a $20 to go shop themselves, because that's part of the assignment is where they're, where they're going to shop and what their values are, and what's guiding that purchase, right? So they need to have the money. And I was like, and I'm not collecting receipts for 24 students worth. No. But once they do this, oh, I say to them on my goodbye after we're in sitting this gorgeous like, and they all, know that we have so many international students, they make us food that they miss eating, and there were FaceTimes with their moms in different time zones. And all these wonderful things are happening, right. And this one young Iranian woman made this celebratory rice pudding, because it was right after all of this business with the women in there. And she was like I need to connect to them somehow. And this is an awesome, wonderful, wonderful. But I say that I say please remember, you should, your relationship with food should be so loving and trusting. Right, you should be able to trust your food, and trust that the food will take good care of you. I understand that the food system is a hot mess. And so you can't do that. But ideally, as a human, you are entitled to this. Right? So when you eat with whatever means we've gone through and everybody has the means to access this. But I've also showed you ways that you can. That are very affordable and easy, and all of those things. We've done that too. I said remember, if there's one

part of me that stays in your mind as you move through, "it's that your relationship with food is supposed to be good. With no battles. No, no measurements." Right? No sacrifice, no virtue.

No. But like, it is that is the best and I am biting my own lip as I'm delivering this so that I don't break out into tears because I am heartbroken at how rife with frustration this relationship is for them when already food insecurity is part of the story. Right? And there are times where I drive home and I'm like, "what a fucking mess, this is all such a giant mess." Right? And now look at these young people. And they just have to deal with it. Right? They just have to deal with the decisions that were made by people with low vision and shitty priorities who came before them. And then, in the student feedback forums, we get messages from students like: "This class was such a welcome break from everything else we do on campus. This class is the only time anybody on campus asked me how I was doing." And while I'm delighted that lands well, I am furious, that we are the only ones, what the fuck?

Shobhana: You're the anomaly.

Courtney: What does food mean to you?

Joshna: Ouf, okay. For me, food is a deep nourishment. Always, always first, right? Otherwise, it's community and connection and all these lovely things. But I feel like we cannot let our understanding of food ever get too far away from the most basic human lifeforce. Right. Our relationship with food is about a lifeforce energy. More than anything else, then there's the parties, then there's the pretty dresses in this, you know what I mean and fine, but whatever. We cannot get too far away from that. Because that's kinda the problem of the world right now. Right? We're not understanding that that our manipulation of the food system has been actually manipulation of our lifeforce energy. Right, we have not understood what we have tossed to the side, right. So I hope that a lot of my work and what I do helps people just to turn those lights on, you know?

Courtney: Talk to us more about those like, the colonialism of French cooking style.

Joshna: Yeah. So I mean, something that really shows up a lot is that people who, cooks who are not from European roots, are forced through those practices, as a measure of their worthiness as cooks, right, so people don't take me seriously until they learn that I have been French trained. And then they're like, "Oh!!", you've, you've but to me, it's like, I say, "Yes, I have learned to jump through the oppressor's hoops, right?" Because the impact of it is even more substantial, because what I like to say is that I had to prove my souffles before my biryanis were taken seriously. Right? I couldn't be me, until I showed them that I could do them. Yeah. Essentially, yeah. And I think I don't understand why we need to humiliate people. Right, and power over people so intensely, just to do their job. Right, what, what I think the status quo cooks don't realize is the degree to which BIPOC people have to turn a part of themselves off in the change room, when we're getting ready. And we're, you know, we're getting ready to start our work, and do this thing that fills us with deep love and passion, you know, what I mean? And

all of that, but then I have to turn myself like, there was a while where I realized that my job...I will be most successful, by working to turn myself into as much of a White man as possible. And then there came a moment, "there's only so far you're going to able to go, this is not gonna work." You have to rethink this or push back on this like this. You can't accept this, this is not gonna work." And that's when I was like, "Well, why are we doing this?"

Courtney: So how do you find that you exercise your interpretation of resistance through food?

Joshna: Ouuuu I love it. Sometimes it is my own little secret. Like, let me think about a great way to describe this. For me, provenance and sourcing and ingredients. Super important. Right? And so there are times when I will like, like, I remember once somebody bought at a big fundraiser that we had, here we go. Somebody bought, there was a cow that a farm had offered up, right. And somebody bought it at the auction and then donated it to the kitchen. Wonderful, glorious donation. Right. And, and so the farmer asked me to decide how I wanted this beast butchered up for lunches. You know what I mean? I had to think about this all, the person who donated asked for the tenderloin. I was like, fine. Well, I'm not feeding anybody filet mignon, so great. But we kept one of the prime rib hunk intact with the intention to cook it for the AGM. Right, because we're like, we'd never be able to afford this. But it's supposed to be a big fancy meal. And so I made like demi-glace, and I had this thing roasting overnight, and I wheeled in a cart with this big roast on it. And we asked community members, how they wanted their meat done. And all of this and I remember thinking to myself, this never happens, right? Scott was my sous chef and he and I were freaking out. I mean, we're using all our cheffy business to put this fancy-ass expensive meal together because we're horseradish cream. We did all of the bits, right? And I was like there's subversion here. Somehow, right by the fact that we are we have the audacity to serve this meal to this community of people, they were all like, "are you joking?!" And we're like, one day, one day only, sometimes we get lucky. And it's prime rib for dinner. Right.

But on the other side of things, I also like, um, when I'm serving a fancy crowd of people who have bought lots of tickets to things, something that was really important for me to do was serve them food that was the same caliber of food that we would serve for lunches. Right. And at the end of the meal, I would say to them all, "here's what we did with your money. We bought this much ingredients. But this much has gone back to the organization for programming, and what we've made you today, it may not be the fancy ass thing that you're expecting, but it's also a very common lunch. For what I serve everybody at The Stop, and now you're just joining us for a meal at The Stop." And in any other context, I would have never gotten away with that low value offering, right?

Courtney: Where do you draw the line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation?

Joshna: Great question. We just, were working through all this…so I will say, I think I take a bit of a sharper line than others do around appropriation meaning that I see it perhaps more frequently than others do. Other in conversation. I've seen other people, other BIPOC people, let's say, willing to be like,

"I'm not bothered by that," where I'm like, "Nope, I don't like it." So I would like to preface this by saying that I think what I land on is that, in Canada, we need to protect the freedom to share and learn from each other's food system, you know, food traditions. I don't, the notion that you can't cook things from other traditions can absolutely not fly. That's not the promise of this country or what we're trying to do here. I think things get thick, when money is involved. Right?

Courtney: A restaurant selling it.

Joshna: Precisely or like this lady and her ghee. This White lady and her Ghee. It's, it's, it's terrible, this ghee, is terrible. But I really do think that the most offensive thing that is happening in the context of appropriation is the assumption that everything is available to you as a member of the status quo, right? That's the most offensive thing that's happening. And I think that can be combatted by just acknowledging that this is not mine. Right? It's the arrogance of that move that I find so irritating. And so go ahead, go on a vacation to Mexico white man, and eat those delicious tacos. And if you want to come back and serve those tacos in your restaurant, make sure you mentioned that you... you were inspired by your recent Mexican vacation and you learned some things, and this is your best approximation. You know what I mean? Your best facsimile let's say about what that what you learned there and who you hope everybody enjoys. When you just bring it and cook it and sell it. That's a problem. Right?

Courtney: Give credit where credit is due. Is there anything else that you think people out there should know about food thinking? When they approach food? What needs to change? Parting thoughts?

Joshna: I got this, this not me, this is from the Toronto Food Policy Council. And that is because food is the most effective common denominator for us as humans and good food policy automatically means good agricultural policy, good health policy, good cultural policy, good labor policy. If you take care of the food, then the land is in better shape. Right? Ag – sorted. Better food, better access, health, sorted. Education, like it just works. And so in a context where so much change is required, yet direction to do so maybe murky and resources are limited. Start with the food; anywhere in your home, in a city, in a school in a country, whatever it is. Start with the food. Sort your food out. get as as wholesome and nourishing and affordable a connection with your food source. And then everything will change your health outcomes will improve you know what I mean? Less waste, meaning maybe you now go to a farmers market. So there's more walking involved, whatever it has to be right. This is so important if you start with the food because all of our civilizations, all of our cities, at their roots were built around access to food. Right for port access, which is a lot of what we have to deal with here. Yeah, but even I remember early, like old farmers, market managers in this town telling me about how Jarvis and Church had bits on the side for the horse and buggies, to go through where the milk bottles would get delivered and all that right. Right. Right. This is it. And that I feel like that is a really hopeful piece. Right? Because we can get swallowed up by the number of issues that we have to tackle. I mean, and the when the, the problem of the cage free eggs, and then the planet is burning, and then this and then trans kids

and Oh my god, okay. Everybody rights are being exploited. And you know, it's all a mess. But if we sort out the food, it will all come together. Right? It really, truly will. We've seen it. And that to me, I feel like it's really exciting. You don't know what to do. I got a plan.

Shobhana: Joshna's food activism reminds us that food rights are about equity and care for all the communities we share space with. From those who access the food banks due to food insecurity and economic pressures to meals served at hospitals in racially and religiously diverse neighborhoods like Brampton or Scarborough, which are part of the Greater Toronto Area. Our approach to food, even in the service industries or non-profit, should not be about just feeding people carbs or unhealthy calories, but rather food that is healthy and delicious because everyone deserves to be fed with care.

Courtney: We hope that you think about Joshna and this conversation the next time you donate to food banks or food drives, or even when you are entering your university cafeteria to have lunch. Stay tuned for more Joshna in Episode 7 where she will be in conversation with Chef Eva Chin. It's an episode you won't want to miss!

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