



YB+YS SEASON 1, EPISODE 4: The Intersection: Food + Art With Chef Precious Pioneer

0:56 Megan Ingram (MI): As a DC foodie and all-around food lover, I'm very excited about this week's guest. Today, we're chatting with chef Precious Pioneer, who just recently moved to Spain. She is a chef, foodie, and a creative. She is passionate about creating content that uplifts and inspires people using food as a medium. We'll be discussing her passion for food, building your personal brand and what diversity looks like in 2021. How's it going?

1:18 Precious Pioneer (PP): Hi, thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to chat with you today.

1:24 MI: Great to have you on. I'm definitely a big foodie, so I'm really excited about chatting about what it's like for you, but I think to start, obviously we want to hear more about why you became a chef and what about food inspires you?

1:36 PP: Yeah, of course. So I think that, as a kid, first I'm a military child, so I've lived all over the United States and so I think being exposed to different people and culture and all these different things has definitely played a role in my love for food and cuisine today. But I honestly think it starts with my family. My mom is definitely the type of person that makes homemade meals and cooks all kinds of different baked goods for houses all down the street. Even a basic American tradition of Thanksgiving, where my grandmother and my aunts would spend hours in the kitchen. I feel like food brings so much more than your day to day life. I don't know. I feel like it brings a lot of nostalgia or home. And so I think that definitely played a role in my love for food and my career.

2:33 MI: That's awesome. That's so great to hear. I definitely, I love and miss so much being able to go out to the restaurants.

2:42 PP: It's definitely a little bit different now.

2:45 MI: I know, definitely in this environment. How does food impact each of us as an individual and in your experience and throughout your career?

2:54 PP: Yeah, for sure. I think that food can be looked at, of course, so many different spectrums. I know that a lot of people care about the health and wellness side of food and the nutritional aspect, which is the basics and the foundation of why we need food. And I think it can also be expanded to represent a culture or a sense of home for people, especially in the United States. We're kind of like a hodgepodge of different people. We're so unique in that way. And so sometimes when you're far away from home or

come from a different country or something like that, your food reminds you of home. I think we've kind of used food a lot and just the American culture, too, for business meetings. You go out for lunch or to have a celebration of an anniversary or birthday, you go out to a fancy dinner, or a restaurant or something like that. And so I think all of these little things that we oversee when it comes to food has always been there. Self-consciously, you don't really think about it so often, but it's always that sweet potato pie your great, great grandmother made and all these different things that always kind of live with us, you know?

4:08 MI: Yeah, and I think nothing's more, you can only see it in these times, which kind of leads me into my next question, talking about COVID and obviously it's had a huge impact on the restaurant industry. How have you navigated through the tough and challenging impact COVID has had in the restaurant and food industry this year?

4:28 PP: Yeah, most definitely. So I was working all the way up until March of last year. And at first, especially for me, I'm in the very beginning of my career. I am in Spain for culinary school actually. So I worked a lot in restaurants and I got a restaurant management degree, two years ago I graduated. And so I was really ambitious to start my career in restaurants and with all of the restaurants closed for a long period of time, or even now when they're partially open, it's never quite enough to have enough staff or consistency, especially with take-out, your regulations changing every other month. And so it has definitely been difficult, especially on this side of the world as well. They have very strict regulations like a curfew at 10 o'clock. You know, most restaurants are open pretty late. And then also, all restaurants are closed, by four o'clock, everything else has to be take-away. And so for me, I haven't been able to find consistent work in the restaurant industry, but I think on the opposite side, it's pushed me to see the larger problems within not only the restaurant industry, but the food industry, which is something that I'm personally really interested in and interested in developing, because as we've seen in COVID, we've seen a lot of food disparity, of access to food in some areas and not enough in other areas. And especially in a time when we're all quarantined or we're limited on access to certain resources, I think that's important to not forget about as we move forward because it has almost been a year at this point.

6:15 MI: It has been a year, even though it feels like a lot longer than that some days.

6:25 PP: I definitely think it's something to think about. We can't just forget about everything that's happened this past year. I think everyone had their own personal revelation, whether that's a career choice or something else, passion project.

6:39 MI: Yeah. Which kind of leads me into my next topic, talking a little bit through it, obviously you're a woman entrepreneur like myself, and I love hearing about other women's stories to success. Why is it important to have the courage to pursue your dreams? Especially like you're saying in a year, like this year where, so much has changed, a lot of things have been uncertain. And we've seen a lot of people have the courage to step out on their own, pursue their own path. And just curious about what you found in your own experience.

7:12 PP: Right. Exactly. As cliché as it sounds, I actually quite admire clichés because it holds so much truth. Even though they are cheesy. I think that life is really too short to do anything otherwise. I think that if you're stuck at that job you hate, unless you're there for monetary reasons to get you to a new level of where you want to go. It's almost like a wasted opportunity, and I think with this time inside, you're forced to face the smoke and see like, if you're actually happy where you are currently. And I think that's something I had to face to be curious. I was really ambitious to work at some of the best restaurants, Michelin star restaurants. I think that'd be really cool to have something of my own. And I realized that maybe it's not for me, I don't know. Like it's something that I thought would just be

something to strive for, but I think that what makes me happy is, you used my introduction using food as a medium to inspire others, to help others. And I don't think that path was directly for me at that moment. And so I think for everyone who is on that path to figure out what exactly they want to do, or if the questioning with their dreams are worth it, even though it can be scary or abnormal, you're taking a risk. I think, at this point, what else do you have to lose? The time is going to pass you either way, whether you just contemplate thinking about it, or you just make the jump and I'm a huge fan of throwing spaghetti against the wall and seeing what sticks. I think entrepreneurship is so funny because you just try a hundred different things, and then you finally find out or figure out what works for you personally. And what you do for entrepreneurship is completely different from what I would do for entrepreneurship. You know what I mean? And I think claiming that for yourself and figuring out what exactly is your perfect thing, is part of the fun. Part of the stress, but part of the fun as well.

9:18 But I think that's also for me too, it was going through that collective thinking of how all the experiences in your work life led you there, and thinking what did I like, did I not like, what would I improve? And that was kind of, that was a big part of my thinking when I came up with my business plan, at least then I got to think what goes through that, like what's worked, what hasn't, what would you improve? What wouldn't you improve? You know, that kind of thinking. And I think a lot of cool things usually come out of that.

9:46 PP: Exactly. I just recommend, if you're questioning it or thinking about it, just take those detours, you know, because worst case scenario, you fail, which is you fail, you learn, and then if you hate it, you can go back to what you were doing before your nine to five or whatever. There's always a fall back. That will always be an option. You know what I mean? So it's definitely worth just seeing what's on the other side for a little bit.

10:14 MI: Yeah, I totally agree. On the opposite end, how would you address the fear that all entrepreneurs have when venturing out to start business for the first time?

10:24 PP: Face it head on, to be frank. I'm no saint in the sense that I am very afraid of different things. I think everybody is naturally afraid of failing, of judgment, of taking a loss. I think everybody envisions entrepreneurship with money and success and all these other claims to fame, but I challenge you to look at anyone who you admire. And I guarantee they never had a perfect streak of success. They definitely had their hiccups, their fumbles, their fallbacks, their bankruptcies. So I challenge you to get through those steps quicker. Failing fast is like the best way to just throw yourself into it. And it may seem silly at first. You may have imposter syndrome, like you don't know what you're doing, but the truth is, everybody kind of goes through that. And you're only a novice for the first little bit, but everybody starts off as a novice. That's like the secret, you don't have to be an expert. You don't have to be an expert on your first try. But at the same time, if you're taking your first try now, like you're way far ahead than you were yesterday. And I think that speaks for itself, you know?

11:38 MI: I totally agree. And I think oftentimes it's like this idea that you have to have perfection before you can put your thing out there, but sometimes it's not always about being perfect. It's just about putting it out there, getting feedback and letting it roll from there and taking the criticism or the little bumps that you're going to have happen.

11:58 PP: Exactly. And if you take all those little bumps and hiccups now, then in the following year, year, you'll be way far off than you were if you wouldn't have started that day.

12:06 MI: Yeah, totally agree, which kind of segues into my next question. What are the lessons that you've learned from starting your own business and going through those experiences?

12:16 PP: I would definitely say don't be afraid to quit. I know that that's counter intuitive to what we just said, but sometimes quitting is the best thing for you as well. I mentioned a little bit before that sometimes being an entrepreneur is like picking up a hundred different things and seeing out what works for you. And sometimes it's just not for you, and that's okay. I remember in college, I was just learning about entrepreneurship and so I had a nutrition business and a painting Etsy business, and like a bracelet business. Like all these different things, just to see if I liked it. And granted, I always gave myself the time, giving it 110% to see if I was hitting that learning curve or if I just generally didn't like it. Of course you need to test that for yourself. But at the same time, it's okay to just be like, actually, I don't like this. Applaud yourself for trying and then pivoting and trying the next thing, and not letting fear of judgment, because trust me, I've had those Facebook pages where you requested people to follow, and it's embarrassing when it closes after a couple of months. I think we all go through that sort of like hiccup phase. But I think one of my biggest lessons is that I'm unapologetically willing to just try anything that I feel passionate towards. Having that fearlessness pushes my ambition to actually be successful and be in those further levels and stepping stones as some of the greater entrepreneurs that I actually look up to. And so I encourage that for you. You may be on level one, trying out your first venture and it's okay if it's not like Amazon or your biggest dream company, that's okay.

14:00 MI: That's really great advice. Talk a little bit about building a personal brand. What things are you doing now to build your own personal brand?

14:11 PP: Right now, I am really focused on culinary school. And so I wanted to figure out what exactly I can do in my career that can line up when I graduate, whether that be job opportunities or to aspire to a dream occupation. I envisioned myself being one of those TV personalities that travels and talks to your great grandmothers about how to roll pasta or something like that. But at the same time, I kind of love to create content that inspires people and then also shares the stories of voices you don't hear every day. Because I think the food industry is very complicated right now, especially with the climate crisis. It definitely has its holes and shortcomings. And so I think normalizing talking about it and spreading education to a lot of people who just don't hear these sort of conversations or what's going on behind the scenes. Bringing awareness is really important to me. And so hopefully in the next couple of years, I can, not necessarily be the face of that, but people will recognize me for those things. And so right now, I feel like being your personal brand or creating your personal brand is like living that. And so whether that's me just talking to you, or it's me, I'm at the grocery store, shopping organic or telling my neighbor about this new farmer's market I found. I think that personal brands can be overwhelming in the sense that people think you need a whole resume or whatever, to be like, Oh, this is who I am. But I think that living your truth in your day to day, or it could be an Instagram post, but I think it goes so much more than that, and keeping that in mind, because if you represent something and then when you do blow up or in whatever career path you are and people don't recognize you as one in the same, then that's where there's oftentimes like a problem. And so I think if you really want to develop a personal brand, you actually have to believe in you as a person, as cheesy as that sounds. But there's truth in that, you know?

16:26 MI: You talked a little bit about voice amplification or sharing other voices. Is there any cool story of a voice that you've shared in the last year that you can talk about?

16:36 PP: Most definitely. I interviewed a blind chef and I thought that was incredibly interesting. She's deaf as well, I believe. So podcasting with her was probably the most interesting thing because, the way that I spoke to her, it came up on her computer as an animation so she would be able to understand, and just capturing her experience and life story working in the kitchen and using different buttons and different experiences compared to my experience in culinary school. I thought that was just a marveling

idea because she wants to inspire people through food. And it's her motto, well, if I can do it, shoot, you certainly can do it. Hearing stories like that really forces you to reflect on your own life. And sometimes you think you're struggling or you're going through it and not to dismiss your own personal problems, but sometimes it puts things in perspective to inspire you to be a little bit better.

17:49 MI: Yeah, that is an awesome story. That's really cool. What advice would you give others who are trying to build their own personal brand?

17:58 PP: I would brainstorm all of the different ways that you can creatively express yourself, like a list of your favorite things, and then find the perfect medium that speaks to you. And that sounds really poetic, but really what I mean is that, for me, I could easily list off, I love food, gardening, my favorite color's blue, you know, anything that identifies you as a person and then figure out what you like, whether that's film, photo, art, different ways to express it so people can see it. And when you have those two aligned, it doesn't become work of figuring out Instagram algorithms and all these different things. Cause it can definitely be overwhelming. It can just become natural, whether that's podcasting and talking to people, if you love speaking or writing, and that can be a blog, you know? So I think that finding the perfect medium complimenting a topic that you identify with, like the favorite cup of coffee. I think it could really help you out, especially when you're starting off. There's a misconception, like building your personal brand, you need a Pinterest, a Tumbler, a Twitter, all these things, and you burn out in the first month or two. It's really quite ridiculous to keep up with everything nowadays. So I think that having one piece of really good content that just speaks to you is the best way to build your personal brand because you'll be known for something that really identifies with you naturally.

19:32 MI: I completely echo that. Yeah, it's too many. I think too often we try and be everything on every platform expressing personal brand. And if it's too much where you need to just focus then on the other community. The other thing that I really liked that you said was speaking to being authentic and really figuring out what your personal brand that's really about you and not so much what you think other people want you to say. Because those are the voices that you want to hear from what you're really true to be your most authentic self.

20:03 PP: Exactly and I don't think that it will just happen overnight. It's way better for slow and consistent, whether that's one piece of content that you're making every day or once a week or whatever, it may be, over a long period of time. Over 30 different posts in the weekend, burning out after a month. So definitely just take it easy. I don't think Beyonce was built in a day either. You have to just relax, you know?

20:33 MI: Cool. Well, the last thing I wanted to touch on was to talk a little bit about diversity. What struggles and adversities have you faced in your career? And what have you done to pivot and overcome them? It could be any experiences that you've had throughout your career.

20:51 PP: Yeah, of course. I think that I have a unique kind of background. I grew up as a military child, which kind of blessed me to meet a wide range of diverse people. At the same time, I'm still a female and a minority in an overpopulated, oversaturated, masculine market of chefs. And so I think, to be taken seriously in my profession has definitely taken a long time to get here. And there are great, female chefs who are working hard every day to make a name in our industry. That being said, I think that taking a step back and just letting hard work speak for itself, I think that's something that I had to learn. And so sometimes, there's a fine balance between sticking up for yourself and making your way in your industry, but also having the grace to just work hard and let people approach you. And so I think that's definitely the hardest adversity I face, but if anything, it's inspiring knowing that there's people behind me who are just as willing to do the same thing. I think everybody just has to play their part.

And I know I speak for a lot of women in their corporate industries or different things like that. It's the accumulation of small things each day that we have to swallow and move on. But sometimes, it takes a while to get there, to get in our spots where you need to be.

22:22 MI: Yeah, I totally, I echo that. What does it mean for you to be an ally in the workplace? Amidst everything that's going on from a racial injustice and bias standpoint?

22:38 PP: To be an ally, I think the most important thing. It's to listen, it's to educate yourself, of course, great. But honestly, I think the biggest thing is to listen because people tend to want to solve a problem or find a solution, but they don't understand the depth or the problem or the perspective of the person who's actually going through these things. And so if you ever find yourself being on the other ear of someone who's trying to address the problem, to share an experience that they had, don't interrupt. Just listen. Use empathy, if you need time to think about it, that's okay. There's a lot of misinformation, but understand that this work isn't new as of 2020. This has been going on since America has been founded. And so if you are serious about being an ally, look for resources. I don't think it's ever on anyone else, but yourself. If that's something you're truly striving to be better at or to work on for yourself, I think that's really powerful as well.

23:52 MI: Yeah, that's really great advice. And I completely agree with that. I think listening is one of the biggest things we can do to continue to be allies and support people in the face of what's going on right now.

24:07 PP: Right. And each industry is different. And so I think it's important just to ask your coworkers, if they've ever experienced something or if they feel comfortable enough sharing, because sometimes you're completely unaware whether that is through pay; that's quite common, having salary transparency or job opportunities and having those discussions with your minority counterparts and things like that. Being a lot more transparent towards those sorts of situations in the workplace can be really effective as well.

24:44 MI: That's great. And really appreciate your perspective on that. Well, thank you so much for coming on to the podcast today. It was really a blast chatting with you. Where can people find you?

24:57 PP: Yeah, sure. You can find me anywhere and everywhere @PreciousPioneer. I have a YouTube channel for personal growth and branding. Also there's a couple of new blogs about my life here in Barcelona. That's been a lot of fun. But yeah, Instagram as well, @PreciousPioneer. And I have a podcast called Precious the Foodie and I have a blog as well, but just anywhere under that name and you'll be able to find me.