

Inside the Kitchen for Stressless Eating with Laura Lea Bryant

Julia Chebotar 00:04

Spice up your life with me Health Chef Julia, as I set out on the journey of What is Healthy. In each episode we'll explore the different meanings of healthy for some healthy means indulging in something decorative and delicious. For others. It's a mental health day and a good workout. There's more to health than just food. It's about living well, enjoying your life and having fun. Having you heard redheads do it best. Come with me, and we'll find out just what healthy is. Welcome back to another episode of what is healthy. And on today's episode. I'm here with Chef and cookbook author, Laura Lea Bryant, thank you so much for being on.

Laura Lea Bryant 00:42

Yes. Oh my gosh, thank you so much for having me. Connect with a fellow lady. I'm not in the city anymore. But it has such a dear, dear complicated place in my heart. And

Julia Chebotar 00:52

well, I've been like stalking you on social media for years now. So

Laura Lea Bryant 00:56

that's so it's so wild. I can't believe it's been that long since I graduated from culinary school. It's crazy.

Julia Chebotar 01:01

I know. Where did you actually Where did you go to culinary school?

Laura Lea Bryant 01:04

Oh, I went to NGI. I went to the net. Me too. Oh my god. Wait, that's I think maybe that was in the original email that was sent. I think that's one of the reasons I was like, Oh my gosh, I had a feeling that we had some kind of overlap. But it's That's crazy. So did you go when it was still? Like separate?

Julia Chebotar 01:22

Yeah, so I was the last year I was half the time at the original like hippie den NGI. And then my last four months, we did our our Friday night dinner at ice.

Laura Lea Bryant 01:33

Okay. Oh my god. That's so crazy. That's so crazy. Well,

Julia Chebotar 01:38

I know I can't believe and I was actually just talking about it with someone. My best friend and culinary school. Like, yes, I'm so fortunate that I had the experience at ice. But nothing compares to the old, like ngi location and how like janky it was I loved it so much.

01:57

It was so it was it was so janky. And it was amazing. I mean, I might get into it. I don't know if it'll make sense for what we're going to talk about. But I had a really hard time in New York when I was there. I was there for five years, and four out of five was brutal. But my last year at ngi was so wonderful. And I think so much of it is because it was just like it's just like this weird, crazy, supportive, hippie community of people who like don't care about anything other than to just like be kind and accepting. And so I was really heartbroken when I heard that it had switched over. I mean, and I get why but I'm glad that we both got to have that experience.

Julia Chebotar 02:38

Absolutely. I was actually there for like the very last dinner at NGI. Like students came back from like the 70s.

02:46

Did they really?

Julia Chebotar 02:47

Yeah, it was a wild.

Laura Lea Bryant 02:48

Yeah, I think I remember getting an email about that and couldn't make it up there. But man that's

Julia Chebotar 02:54

I ordered the cookbook on Amazon.

02:56

Oh, wait, you know what? I do have it? Yes, I do have It's beautiful. I don't know. The other by like a group of students. No,

Julia Chebotar 03:03

it was one student Her name is Alex Shipman. She actually has a cookbook now too. And she I met her because ngi was doing a class like what are the classes called whether or not like part of the curriculum,

Laura Lea Bryant 03:18

whatever the elective courses? Yeah,

Julia Chebotar 03:20

yeah. And she did like a full social media photography course. Through like food. And they hired her to do the cookbook.

03:27

Oh, that's so cool. Cool. I want to look her up. That's

Julia Chebotar 03:31

Yeah, she's I'll send you her thing. She's great. Oh my gosh, it's such a small world. I love that. So tell me more about what you're doing now. Because I'm just like, so impressed with everything that you have on social and your meal planning program and all the things.

03:47

Thank you. Yeah, I mean, it's funny, because it's just, I'm sure you found this too. And I think most people, most of my class, at least at ngi, you just fly by the seat of your pants until you don't you know, and then you still kind of always are. But really, it's taken about eight years. For me to get to a point, I feel like I have a really clear vision for what my business looks like. But the two main components of my business are well really it all centers around recipe development, and all the components that go into that in the writing and photography, but it shows up in different ways. So I have my cookbooks and I have two cookbooks and Mike thank you I mean it's it was it's such a fun process it like schools you I mean, it's so hard but but it was awesome. So my cookbooks and my blog lol balanced calm, which is like my original website, the that's where I put my sort of like more specialty focused recipes. So for people who have allergies, autoimmune diseases, some kind of intolerance or dietary need or preference, that's really where those recipes live, that really were the kind of like origin of what I was doing. Finding having a little bit of some For everybody, and, you know, like a coconut power base, or whatever it is, but about successes now nine months ago, when the world started falling. It was I had a, I had a really big kind of like regulatory experience where I realized that so much of what I was doing with these specialty ingredients, and recipes, while they're so important for the people who need them, they're not accessible or affordable to most people in the country still. And so I really wanted to create something that offers truly affordable and accessible food for people who don't need those like specialty ingredients. And I also needed to focus more digitally and online because I was doing a ton of cooking classes in person. So I created what is called the simply balanced meal plan community. And it basically takes the idea of meal planning, but turns it into a completely different structure than what I've seen before typically, like meal plan apps and stuff. It's just, it just it like spits out five different recipes. And then it kind of aggregates the ingredient list from all five different recipes. And so one, you're still in the kitchen every single night. And as much as I love to cook, like I would like to have some weeknights free as well. But it's also it also ends up being like complicated, because each night you're you're kind of having to think about a brand new recipe and a brand new technique and the prep and all of that. And so I created this meal plan community specifically with a structure about cooking structure, because I hadn't seen anything where you do. It's a it's an ingredient lists where the recipes and the ingredients work in tandem. So I choose them specifically. So if I tell you to get one onion, you're gonna use half of it and one recipe and half of it and another, almost no leftover ingredients. And then it makes four ingredients that you then are, you're done, and you have them to eat throughout the week. And I shot for all of them at Walmart. And it was just a really humbling experience to really recognize like that for most people, what I've been doing is it's great, but it's it's really not it's not accessible, you know,

Julia Chebotar 07:02

it's not and a lot of people don't know what batch cooking is. So I love that you like this explained it. Because it makes sense if you have like four different recipes, but you kind of can cook for each recipe in unison set like separately, but mix it up at the same time, I guess

07:18

totally. And you and I know that naturally from being chefs over the years you that's how that's how we think about things is how do I get all you know all my knees on floss and my prep and and then I cook but most people don't know that. So the way most recipes are written is really isn't for you to first do your prep. Instead, it'll be like, you know, to carrots, comma, chops, but that it that's not built into the actual instructions itself. So you start reading the instructions, you're like, Okay, I was supposed to chop the carrots first. You know, and with mine, it's like, I'm just going to tell you what the ingredients are. And then I'm gonna tell you what to do with all of them and then how to cook them. So it's been a lot of fun, you know, and it seems to be filling a need for people which is really why we do what we do in the first place. Right?

Julia Chebotar 08:02

Yeah, exactly. And they just like sign up right through like your link tree or right on your website. Yeah, it's

08:07

on my link tree. So lol balanced calm is my main blog and you can get a link to the meal plan website there. But there is a separate it's a separate website. It's simply Laura lee.com slash meal plans so I can share those with you.

Julia Chebotar 08:19

Yeah, amazing. We'll put them in the bio notes.

Laura Lea Bryant 08:22

Awesome.

Julia Chebotar 08:23

Um, how do you stay healthy like in all of this? What are your like, go twos. I mean, I you were you're not going to tell me that you're like drink Uzu water like we learned in school? Or maybe you do but

08:36

Oh, funny. I mean, yeah. So yeah. Ngi is very, like Chinese, Chinese medicine focused and very macrobiotic. And at least was when I was there and plant based. So when I first graduated and I was sharing these recipes with like the Nashville community everyone was like, I mean, I guess I can get on board with some of this, but so much of it was so foreign. And no, I definitely don't make like Apple kazoo for like the occasional hip work. But it's good to know. I mean, it's good. And I will say I mean things like nice. Okay, so I definitely do incorporate that and into some of my ingredients. And I think I learned about nutritional yeast in culinary school.

Julia Chebotar 09:12

Yeah, I definitely use nutritional use miso paste, and I definitely use that every week.

09:18

I use those things a lot. So I definitely learned a lot from it. But for the most part, I mean, how I stay healthy, I think really has changed a lot. What's interesting is I would say in the last three years of my life, I eat less traditionally healthy than I did probably the previous five or six years but I have felt physically healthier by and I just it's such a reminder that at the end of the day, it all comes down to your perspective and your mental health. I think barring obviously you know specific dietary concerns and things you're working through. I really think so much of it is about it's about being in a relaxed Nervous System state when you eat rather than I don't want people and I'm sure you're the same way like I would rather somebody eat something that's like a little bit less healthy. But do it in a relaxed like way with no judgment, no food rolls, then like scarfing down a kale salad, but like distracted and worrying about how much fat is in the dressing, and that can

Julia Chebotar 10:17

absolutely I couldn't agree with you more like I just like food should be enjoyed, you should be happy. Like, I also I don't understand when people like Oh, I forgot to eat, I don't get those people. And I don't get the people that like by stressing so much about what you're putting into your body. I think that like triggers other reactions in the body that increased stress and can later in the line increase other autoimmune issues and all sorts of mental health problems when like food should be enjoyed and should make you happy and should nourish you, but to just all around, you should be happy with what you're eating.

Laura Lea Bryant 10:54

Totally like, I really think that's that low grade state of chronic stress that we're all living in that has been worse in the last six to eight months, it's important to remember that that diet can combat that, but that your mental health can combat that even I think even more in some ways, by just really trying to be as present as possible. And try to sort of like re cultivate that attitude that you have about food when you're young, which is yes, you want it to taste good, and you enjoy it until you're done with it, and then you're done with it. And I think if we were able to be present and get rid of all the thoughts about what it means to eat that food, and how much and just all the thoughts around it, then we would or we would naturally listen to our body's hunger cues and, and that kind of thing. So it's, it's interesting. And I definitely and I know I'm not alone in this, I have had way more cravings for like comfort food. In the last however long since the pandemic, I think it's just made us, you know, really want some kind of comfort and sense of safety. And so I've really been focused more on like, healthiest versions of those kinds of comfort foods, you know, I'm definitely not afraid of like rice and take a little pasta here and there. And I just try to you know, find something that feels really nourishing, but then add vegetables and like good quality proteins to it.

Julia Chebotar 12:09

Exactly. And it can school, they definitely taught us that grains and carbs, okay, it's just having it like in a full balanced meal and having it properly digest and all the things and I think that people are also very, really triggered by terms like no carb keto, or low fat, fat free. And they don't really like look into the ingredients of what they're putting into their bodies.

12:34

Yeah, yeah, people ask me a lot, if I, why I don't share nutritional information for my recipes, and especially in my cookbooks. And it wouldn't be hard for me to do that. That's not that much extra work for someone to plug them into some kind of, there are lots of things that there are lots of cookbooks that do that. But I don't want to do that. Because as soon as you give people numbers, they will make meaning of those numbers. And I don't want them to make meaning of them, because they don't know what it means. And so the meaning that they make really could hurt them more than it could help them. So I would just rather than focus on how the food makes them feel then filling in some like idea of what it should look like. Absolutely.

Julia Chebotar 13:15

I couldn't agree with you more. I struggle with this because I go to people's homes, and I will meal prep and do all the things. And by the time I get home, I don't want to do it. And it's something that I'm trying to work on. But are there any like tips or tricks that you tell clients, or people who sign up for the meal plan that like to like, you know, sometimes you need that like one little step to get you over the hump to like get into the the mental process of doing it more often for yourself? So are there any kind of tricks or things that you swear by to help you really get on to that level?

Laura Lea Bryant 13:53

Yeah, definitely. So what's interesting about one of the things that's different about these meal plans, as well as we only release one per month, as opposed to per week. And the reason that we do that is because I want people practicing these meal plans. And I know that's not sexy, and it's not glamorous, but it is one of the best ways to start to feel like you actually have control and that you actually be they become easy when you practice them. So if you're just making brand new recipes every single week, you're not going to practice. And it means that every single time you're going to feel almost like a newbie in the kitchen being like, Okay, what does this one say? And then what do I do with this one? And what about, so I want people to take these and now at this point, we have I mean, I think almost 10 meal plans on there. And most people haven't even made all of them anyway. So I just encourage people to take a meal plan and make it a couple weeks in a row. And what's amazing is all of a sudden something that may have taken you, you know, four hours takes you two hours and you can start to incorporate the things that you really love and tweak it and that I think is one of the biggest mental hurdles is just the over the overwhelm that comes with it. But if you know and then the other thing about practicing is that you start to have Have your pantry staples lying around. So preparation. So if you know you have most of the things that you need except for your perishables, it just becomes way less daunting. And the reality is, it's, it's great if people can, like, you know, purchase healthy takeout all the time, but like, most people, like 99% of people can't afford that. And so we have, we need to be cooking at home, like we just we have to find a way to improve our relationship with it. And then the other thing I would say kind of along those lines is just setting yourself up for success environmentally. So, you know, put on music for kombucha or a glass of wine and, you know, kick everybody out of the kitchen and just make it a, you know, a pleasant experience or listen to a podcast, and create create an experience that you actually look forward to. And I don't know, I don't know anyone who makes beautiful food for themselves and has it to eat throughout the week who like doesn't like that?

Julia Chebotar 15:54

You know, exactly. You just need you have to get over that hurdle. And it's like, You're so right. It's it's setting the mood getting it all laid out. Like, I definitely have all the pantry staples. Like I'm a chef. It's just, it's just like, do I want to lay on the couch right now in order. And it's the thing that the other thing, like you said, it's so expensive, especially in New York, like, my bills literally go to Ubers. And just like obscene seamless bills, I'm like, I could have made this and spent \$7.

16:22

And yours would have tasted better. Like I mean, that's the thing is like takeout, like nine out of 10 times. I'm like, it's just disappointing. And it's so if and you don't really know what's going in,

Julia Chebotar 16:33

I was literally about to say that you don't know what oils they use, you don't know what kind of

Laura Lea Bryant 16:37

So I just I think it's you know, we should all treat ourselves every now and again, I think to whatever sounds really good when it comes to taking out or picking up. But most of the time, I think people are like, Oh, I couldn't just throw in something together. And I get it you and I as we were I think we were talking about it before we started. But you know, when you cook for people for a living, that's I mean, selfishly, one of the reasons I created these meal plans is and I just put my freezer is now full of a meal plan for you know, the next month because I at the end of the day from testing and cooking, I don't want to take the time to make something so my own food was sitting there ready for me to reheat it. You also have to make peace with leftovers. And like reheating that's part of the deal.

Julia Chebotar 17:22

There are people who I had an ex one time who's refused to eat any leftovers, really. And I was I was just like sitting there eating it myself. And I'm like, how do you live off of not eating leftovers?

17:33

I don't get it either. I think most people have it's more of like a mental hurdle for them.

Julia Chebotar 17:37

Yeah, or like an aesthetic. Yeah, I

17:39

definitely have people who are who are like that. And you know, honestly, my meal plans aren't. If you are not even if you're not even open to try and leftovers. These are not the right fit for you. But I did meals, I designed the meal so that they are easy to reheat and freeze for the most part. So they're things that should like do that really well. And as you and I also know,

18:00

I mean,

18:00

food that has had like 24 hours to sit in the fridge and it tastes better.

Julia Chebotar 18:06

It gets so much more flavorful. Yeah, I agree. So you mentioned that they couldn't fight? Well, we'll have the links for the the Walmart shopping. So like, how did you go into Walmart and do all of this, you're like, Okay, I'm gonna do it on a budget was there like a price point.

Laura Lea Bryant 18:24

So basically what I did, I'm sure I looked like a crazy person. But I wanted to start shopping for Walmart for the meal plans, because I wanted them to be accessible. And there are a lot of people where even if money is not the objection, the only thing they have close to them within like an hour's drive like in a lot of the country is a Walmart. And I started to find some like cool healthy things at Walmart. But I realized with 1000s and 1000s of skewers you could want it's really hard to find them yourself. And to there will be like 10 bags of almonds and like one of them is the one that's healthy and affordable. But you have to know what it is. So I literally went into Walmart and probably spent 10 to 12 hours. Every single shelf I was like on my hands and knees like looking at the price pricing because I was figuring out not only like what's healthy, but also like per ounce and per serving what the best price deal was. And like asking people like what does this say? So I went I aggregated it into a 10 page PDF that has all the healthiest finds at Walmart that are also the best prices and what the prices are at my store and that kind of thing. Because again, like there was like three like scattered throughout the store. There were three canned coconut melts and one of them was absolute crap. One of them was really expensive and one of them was a great option. So I'm like look for this one, you know?

Julia Chebotar 19:46

And that's another thing people like never check the ingredients because we're triggered just to read the label.

Laura Lea Bryant 19:51

Yeah, and you really have to be careful because it is it's really frustrating. I mean like I said like the almonds is a good example just because one will be like a bag of they look Exact same, but one has some weird oil and like a bunch of preservatives and the other one, like almonds. So,

Julia Chebotar 20:07

and that's all on the website as well. Yeah.

20:11

Yeah, that is on alibaba.com and under my shop page and I can share that. And then if you are a community member if you're in my mealtime community, you get that for free. So that's on the member homepage just for you to have whenever. Okay, amazing.

Julia Chebotar 20:25

So something I've been asking everyone is gelassen or what would your last meal be? appetizer entree dessert.

20:35

Oh my god. I love this. So

Julia Chebotar 20:36

mine was gross. Mine was like a chicken parm. And calamari salad and an affogato for dessert. So

20:45

my appetizer would probably be like a really like would be like a mini cheese plate with like, some like amazing cheeses, crackers, like some pickles to me, and I would probably put those together and like sugary entree would honestly be like a really good burger with like, really like freshly cut fries and mayo because that's what I like to dip my fries and you're really amazing burger with like a brioche bun. And there's a burger in Nashville that actually comes to mind. It's so good. And then for dessert, I mean, I am like molten chocolate lava cake like anything. Chocolate with like whipped cream or, or like vanilla ice cream.

Julia Chebotar 21:27

Yeah, it's okay. It's your last day on earth, you can do whatever you want. There are certain recipes from ngi that I still use that I like remembered like all flowerless almond, almond torte Oh, I

21:41

haven't made that again. yet. I

Julia Chebotar 21:43

can tell you right now it's three cups of almond flour, one cup of maple syrup, and six eggs. And some almond extract never fails. It's like four ingredients. And everybody in my class always made fun of me. Because I wanted that during cookies and baking. And that's not my so I would always pick the recipe that had like the least least amount of ingredients and then it could all go into a food processor.

22:05

I may get you to send me that I have my binders leftover but I don't remember that exact one. So I may have to mine was all digital. So

Julia Chebotar 22:12

was on like a Google Drive. So before we graduated, I read downloaded the Google Drive. So I have it all so I can send you a bunch of stuff.

22:22

Awesome. I would love that. Yeah, we ours is definitely all hardcopy. I know I'm sure everyone does that. I mean, it's there's such good recipes. There's so much good stuff. There's

Julia Chebotar 22:32

so much good stuff. And like it's interesting that the person who created it has like no culinary background. Yeah, I

22:37

mean, I tell people that all the time. Like, I'm glad that we went to ngi because it is so specialty focused, but at the same time, like what's made us good at like better chefs. It's just doing it. It's not It's not the squeak, you don't come out of culinary school, a good chef, you do everything like once. Oh, I'm two people. I'm just like, you know, just if you if what you want is to be a really good cook. You just got to do it every day.

Julia Chebotar 23:04

I love that. That's your method to that. Like they have to repeat the recipes because that is how you become confident in the kitchen. That is how Yeah, and then like, once you're more confident with that recipe, you can, you know, grab the ingredients on the go and just make it on the spot and I feel good and nourished and yeah, and accomplished

23:23

and in control. I mean, it's powered. It's just Yeah, it's

23:27

a good thing.

Julia Chebotar 23:28

I'm amazing. I am so thankful that you came on today and we chatted and we got to reconnect on all things ngi

23:37

I know I hope we can meet in person someday.

Julia Chebotar 23:38

Definitely. And I hope that once that when this episode airs, we're gonna do a little live cooking together. Maybe we'll do like a throwback ngi recipe. Yes.

23:47

Oh my god. Yeah. Maybe we'll make the chocolate tart. Because I know my community would love to see that. Yes. Okay,

Julia Chebotar 23:54

let's make that. Thank you so much for being on. I really, really appreciate it. And then please mention again, where everybody can follow you, your website, Instagram, all the things and then we'll also link it

24:07

awesome. So I'm at Laura Lee balanced on Instagram. And then lol balance is my main blog. And that will just take you to a little bit of everything. So thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me. Bye. See ya.