Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 8: Connecting the Yale community with food

**Peter Salovey:** Hello everyone. Welcome to Yale Talk. I’m Peter Salovey and today I’m delighted to wrap up Staff Spirit Week with a conversation about something that can always bring the Yale community together: food. As many of you know, Staff Appreciation Day is an annual tradition that we began at Yale six years ago. Unfortunately, this year we can’t gather together on Old Campus to share food and listen to music and catch up after the busyness of the spring semester, but I am glad that we are recognizing staff for their contributions to every aspect of our university through a week of online activities. It’s fitting today that I’m joined by two Yale hospitality staff members for our conversation. Food has always played a big part of life at Yale, and I miss my regular lunches with students at dining halls, the meals that I share with faculty and staff at various university gatherings, and the food I enjoy with alumni during reunions. But we’ll have those moments again. And although Yale hospitality operations have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, its staff members have been contributing to our community and realizing Yale’s mission in other ways. Over the last few months, several of our Yale Hospitality staff went beyond the call of duty to feed emergency workers and others who were quarantined on the Yale campus. They also provided food for our neighbors in New Haven, and I’m joined today by two colleagues who led such efforts: Maureen O’Donnell is a residential dining general manager and Joseph “Rusty” Hamilton is a baker at Yale’s Culinary Support Center. Maureen and Rusty, thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

**Rusty:** Oh, thank you for having us.

**Maureen:** Thank you. So happy to be here.

**Peter:** Thank you both. So, Maureen, over the years Yale Hospitality has had a long-term relationship with the City of New Haven by providing food to Soup Kitchens, staff volunteering for fundraising and participating in all kinds of activities in support of the community. Tell me a little bit more about Yale Hospitality’s relationship with New Haven’s soup kitchens, especially now during the COVID 19 pandemic.

**Maureen:** Thank you, President Salovey. As you know, this period, our world has been turned upside down. But, our team within Yale Hospitality made sure to prioritize what was more important: the health and safety of our staff, our students, and our greater New Haven Community. And today this still remains our priority and top focus for us. As food service providers, we absolutely hate to waste food, and our relationship we have with our partners provides an avenue for us to offer really good food to our community members. Our community partners that we work with include Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen, Food Rescue USA, St. Thomas Moore, and Columbus House, and that’s just a small sampling of some of the folks that we do support in New Haven. Over the years, our department has always had a multifaceted approach to supporting our community needs and different things that we provide as a department to New Haven: our food donations, fundraising through benefit dinners, supporting food drives. We do that at Thanksgiving with the Turkey Drive in the Yale Police Department, Thanksgiving Holiday Support for Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen’s big Thanksgiving Turkey Day, kitchen equipment repair and general logistics and planning. So, as a department, we’re super proud to be able to support the community in the ways that we do.

**Peter:** Let me stay with you for just a minute, Maureen. When you work in a soup kitchen or support a soup kitchen, tell us a little bit more operationally what we do. We supply some of the food, and are we also serving it?

**Maureen:** Yes, we do have community within our units. In the colleges, we have people who do volunteer on a regular basis. In the residential colleges especially, we have an estimate for what we prepare food for. And sometimes all of our students come in and eat with us, but sometimes they decide to go elsewhere. It’s an estimate. So, sometimes we do have leftovers. We have a system set up within dining that several different organizations come around to assigned dining halls to pick up our leftovers and repurpose that food for the community and the soup kitchens. We do a variety of things on both levels.

**Peter:** Thank you. It makes me very proud, but of course it’s so needed in our community always, but particularly these days.

**Maureen:** Absolutely.

**Peter:** Rusty, about two weeks into the pandemic, Yale’s bake shop turned its ovens over to become a different kind of facility; to become almost like a warehouse. We turned off the ovens and began to be a packaging warehouse in order to deliver food to members of our community who were sheltering in place. Tell us a little bit more about that and how you volunteered to help lead that effort.

**Rusty:** I guess it was around spring break when this thing started. So, we at the bake shop kind of on a transition period, are we going to wait till the students come back the next week? And then the pandemic started, so all of a sudden, the shutdown began. And I give all the credit to the management staff for informing everybody what is going on as far as social distancing, help things are going on, what we’re going to be doing. Transition was pretty easy considering management supplied us with the things they wanted to do. They supplied us with the material, the food, everything. And they provided us with the team that did everything. I’m always willing to help people out in times of need and everything else. It was a great opportunity to do that.

**Peter:** And Rusty, you ended up essentially preparing hundreds of meals every day that could be packaged up and delivered to wherever our students or anybody else was residing on campus, right?

**Rusty:** Right. And that’s where management came in. They made sure the cooks, myself were there early to prepare the meals. They then had people come in to package the meal and everything and then the drivers delivered the meals, so every team worked at the same time, so it was one big unit. It was very satisfying to see everybody work like that.

**Peter:** Teamwork is so important, particularly in food service. And this is not just members of the Yale community per se who we’re feeding, these are some of the first responders who are living in residential colleges and others who are quarantined. If we had ended up using the field hospital that we created in the Lanman Center of Payne Whitney Gymnasium, would you have been doing deliveries there, too? It sounds like we would have.

**Rusty:** Whatever is necessary. I’m sure like myself, people are willing to help in dire situations.

**Peter:** Even though Yale’s bake shop turned off its ovens, have you had a chance to do any baking at all?

**Rusty:** Only at home. You know, my wife sometimes wants me to prepare something. She’ll prepare the meal and then look at me and say, “All right, it’s time for dessert.” So now, all of a sudden, I’m put on the front line. Of course, I have the material and equipment here to do it, so it makes it pretty simple. And of course, I have the knowledge, so it makes it even easier.

**Peter:** Rusty, I have to say you’re a fantastic baker, and I’ve eaten the creations you have made for Yale, which are incredibly impressive. Your previous employer was a well-known patisserie in New Haven, and I ate creations that you produced for them as well.

**Rusty:** Thank you. Over the years I can see your face come in there, probably every other weekend, so I knew you by face not by name.

**Peter**: I remember chocolate mice that you made, and we served them at a wedding of a member of my staff that we held in my back yard. The little kids at that wedding were just thrilled to eat those chocolate mice.

**Rusty:** Exactly. It was something to talk about.

**Peter:** Maureen, you had to make a lot of adjustments in order to provide food for the community through the soup kitchens and such. Tell us a little bit more. In what ways are you working now that before COVID you didn’t have to do?

**Maureen:** Well now particularly, safety is our top priority. Safety for our staff, safety for the people that we’re working with because now we’re in just preparation mode for the fall. So, it’s mask wearing and washing hands and making sure we’re social distancing and really setting up those safe work places for our staff. We’ve started to bring our staff back on June 15th, so we’ve been back for a little over a month now. And just working hard to get ready for the fall, but really just creating a safe space, and a comfortable space for people to work. And it’s important that we all do our part to make sure that we keep the New Haven community safe.

**Peter:** I love your comments and Rusty’s comments that we’re doing that as a team, that management and our workforce are partnering up together and working collaboratively. I love seeing that.

**Maureen:** Absolutely. We can’t do it without each other.

**Peter:** It’s so true in so many parts of this university.

**Maureen:** Absolutely.

**Peter:** Let me go a little farther afield from food. Rusty I know you’re a golfer.

**Rusty:** Oh Yeah.

**Peter:** You know at age 60, I decided I’d play just a little recreational golf. In college and in grad school, when I got to Yale for graduate school, we have such a beautiful course, but then I didn’t play for decades. And when I turned 60, I decided I needed some recreation. I need to get outside a little bit more and mostly, I need to figure out ways to manage stress. And as long as I wasn’t stressing about golf, golf was a good way to do that. And so, I’m terrible, but I enjoy being out there. But I have a feeling you’re not playing much golf these days with all of your volunteer activities. How do you get the work/ life balance in a time of crisis?

**Rusty:** You’re right, I’m not playing a lot of golf right now but it’s a passion. It’s one of those things you can do on a consistent level and also get better at the same time. It’s like your job. You always want to be consistent. You always want to be better. I don’t worry about the stress part of not playing right now. In my mind I’m always on the 5th hole or the 6th hole, so there’s always a shot to be played. The shots we play right now is helping individuals in this crisis. That’s exactly what I’m doing, and I’m grateful Yale’s management staff asked me to join their team. This is a team I’m working for now. The golf will happen later on. It’s not a problem.

**Peter:** You know you have such a nice light touch with your bakery creations, whether you’re icing a cake or making those chocolate mice or a tart or what have you. My guess is that generalizes to a nice light touch with the putter, the chipper, right? It all works together.

**Rusty:** No, it doesn’t. I’ll you what, the lightness in the bake shop and lightness on the golf course are two different things. You mention the frustration part of it. It is frustrating. But you know what, it’s not my day job, so I don’t worry about it.

**Peter:** That’s great. That’s great. And Maureen, what are you doing to keep some work/ life balance these days?

**Maureen**: Like Rusty, I have also a passion for baking. I went to culinary school but really wanted to go be a baker but ended up at culinary school. So, my passion at home actually is baking, and did a lot of baking from the time that we were home and posted lots of different things on Facebook and tried different recipes. Yeah, so it was fun, and it was a great distraction. I was able to entertain my friends with, “look at this good stuff!” So, it was good.

**Peter:** Maureen, have you been part of this banana baking craze that the newspapers keep writing about?

**Maureen:** You know what? I did. I tried my hand at a different couple of banana breads, chocolate chip, and some other things. Now that I’ve got zucchini coming out of the garden, I’m making zucchini breads and doing different things with all the zucchini that’s coming out of my garden right now.

**Rusty:** Chocolate zucchini bread, Maureen. You should try it.

**Maureen:** Yeah, I’ve looked at those recipes.

**Peter:** Fantastic. Well, I’d like to conclude our podcast with a kind of practical question that might be helpful for our colleagues and friends and our students. So, you know in times of stress and times of challenge, we often turn to food as a part of what makes us comfortable. The phrase, “comfort food” didn’t come out of nowhere. In thinking about trying to use food to make us feel better, we can make some unhealthy choices, or we can make healthy choices. I’m wondering what healthy comfort foods do you or your family eat? Perhaps that you serve them or maybe that you could recommend to those listening to our podcast today. Maureen, I’m going to start with you.

**Maureen:** OK. Thank you. As I said I do love to cook and bake and always trying to find different recipes and different things to make for myself and my husband, and you know I try to make simple choices: work more vegetables in. If I can change out a zucchini noodle for a pasta, we’ll do that. I also like working with different flours when I bake; alternative flours, whether it’s an almond flour or a gluten free flour and just really trying to make those simple choices in trying to make some food items healthier.

**Peter:** Rusty, how about you? How do you make those healthy choices that still have that comfort food feeling?

**Rusty:** My comfort food go-to dish of the summer has been a fresh tomato mozzarella. Fresh mozzarella with basil, olive oil, vinegar on a bed of lettuce and then grilled blackened chicken or a grilled blackened salmon to go on top of that. And the dessert is very simple. It’s the almond cake with blueberries and raspberries, so it’s like you got that nice summer feeling to it.

**Peter:** That’s sounds great. I can tell you that Marta and I, when we can, have done a lot more grilling this summer.

**Rusty:** Yes.

**Peter:** And I enjoy it. Marta enjoys the prep, and I enjoy the grill. We’re doing a lot more fish on the grill. You know, marinating it and grilling it but keeping it fairly simple. And then cooking it on the grill. But more and more enjoying those vegetables on the grills. Cutting those brussels sprouts in half, coating them with a little olive oil and grilling them up and everything tastes so good. I’m very lucky. Marta’s hobby is herb gardening, so she’s got seven or eight different herbs, plus onions and scallions and garlic and potatoes, growing in the backyard, and we harvest that out and use it a lot in cooking. She makes a great Herbes de Provence she gives away after she has harvested her crop each year. And using a lot more of those herbs in the prep for what we’re grilling, it just takes great. It tastes really fresh. It was a live plant not too long before we’re actually putting it on the fish. So, we’re having a good time when we can.

So, thank you both so much for joining me for staff spirit week. I’m really just so grateful for all that you do for Yale, for all that you’re doing for our local community. Just thank you. Thank you on behalf of everyone who you have been serving.

To our friends and members of the Yale community, thank you for joining us today for Yale Talk. And until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

**Rusty:** Go Foodie!

**Peter:** The theme music, “Butterflies and Bees” is composed by Yale Professor of Music and Director of University Bands, Thomas C. Duffy, and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.